

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray color, framing the entire page.

Otherside Picnic: Volume 1

Iori Miyazawa

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OTHERSIDE PICNIC

Their Strange
Exploration Files



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File 1: Kunekune Hunting

1

Beneath the clear May sky, I lay in a grassy field, drowning.

Plankton-like shapes were jumping around across the backdrop of the blue sky. It was what it looked like when you could see the white blood cells in your eyes—or so I had read somewhere.

The wind caressing my upturned face carried the stench of raw fish. I had no idea if it really was fish or not. Since coming to the Otherside, I hadn't seen a single fish, after all.

I had fallen flat on my back in the middle of grass taller than me. The roots of the grass were submerged in water, so my back was soaked, too. It was what you might call a half-bath.

No, that's wrong. Completely wrong. You wouldn't call it that.

If anything, it was like one of the lie-down baths at the super bathhouse. Although, the water was a bit over 20 centimeters deep, so if I didn't make an effort to keep my face above the water, it would pour in through my nose and mouth. There was no lie-down bath like that, and if there was it'd be torture. The lie-down bath of death.

In fact, I was getting closer to death by the second. My Uniqlo fleece and my camo pants were heavy with water. It had been... how many minutes since I ended up like this? There wasn't a clock in sight, so I didn't know how long it had been, but I wasn't going to be able to keep my face above water for much longer. My neck was cramped and hurt, and my abs had refused to stop quivering for a while now. I just didn't have the strength. You know when you try to run in a dream, and your legs flop around, not moving at all like you want them to? That's exactly what it was like. My limbs were practically paralyzed. They had been ever since I saw that thing.

I never saw this coming—I was naive. I'd found this world, got excited, headed in to explore, then ultimately ran into something dangerous and ended up close to drowning.

What would happen if I died here? In the surface world, were they going to talk about the mysterious disappearance of a twenty-year-old female university student? Eagh, they were bound to write all sorts of things about me that weren't true.

That'd suck. I'm sorry, Mom.

...No. If I was being honest, even if I up and vanished, no one was really going to care much. I had no friends, so the only ones I'd be

troubling were the people in the university office who would notice I hadn't paid my school fees, and the people at the student support organization who noticed I was behind on my student loan repayment.

Thinking about that only made it hurt more.

Even if I did make it to graduation, it was basically guaranteed I would be inundated by student loan debt. With my future looking as dark as it was, maybe dying here in the Otherside wasn't so bad after all...?

...Still, I don't want it to be painful or excruciating. Just how much were you supposed to suffer when drowning, again? I started to think, then I heard something nearby.

The sound of grass parting. Footsteps in the water... approaching. An animal? From the sound of the footsteps, whatever it was was reasonably large.

What could it be? It wasn't just fish... I hadn't seen any animal fit to be called one here in the Otherside. Not being able to see what it was through the grass was only making me feel more uneasy.

I considered laying low, but it was no use. They must have heard me gasping as I tried to come up for air, because a voice came from the other side of the grass.

"Is someone there?"

They're human!

Caught by surprise, I couldn't speak.

It was a young woman's voice with an out-of-place sound of cheer in her tone, like she was going on a stroll through the park on a fine day. Meanwhile, here I was, inching ever closer to death.

"...Could it be, Satsuki?" the voice asked. Who was that? Not me, that was for sure.

While I was confused, the voice became worried, and spoke up again. "Hey, should I come help? Or are you dead already?"

"Ah! Ah! I'm not de—"

I opened my mouth, despite not having meant to, and water rushed in. The liquid that filled my mouth had no taste. None at all. *Bwah*. I hurriedly spat it out, and tried again.

"I'm alive! Help!"

While I was screaming shamelessly, I remembered... The reason I'd ended up like this in the first place was still around here somewhere.

"W-Watch out. There's a dangerous one nearby," I stammered.

"Dangerous? What's it like?"

"W-White, and wiggling..."

When I tried to explain it, the image of that thing came back into my mind. Instantly, I was engulfed by an intensely sickening feeling, and I groaned.

I shut my eyes tight, trying to endure, but the white image in my brain grew more and more vivid, my mind being pulled towards it even as I knew that was a bad idea, and my head felt like it was being twisted around.

“Urgh...”

“What’s wrong?”

“When you see it, it messes with your head... You can’t look...”

That was all I managed to say, and then my willpower and stamina both gave out.

My mind fell into an eddy of unceasing dizziness. My face sank into the tasteless water. Bubbles poured out of my mouth.

The sky I was looking up to swayed in the water. The bubbles rose to the sky, and the clouds burst.

Then...

Into that empty sky, devoid of birds, divided into nothing but white and blue, a bright golden color descended.

I felt a hand behind my neck, my body being lifted. It was almost too easy, the way I was saved from the water.

While I was soaked and blinking, the owner of the voice smiled at me.

“I thought you were Ophelia,” she said.

“Huh?” I replied.

No, I got it. I knew who Ophelia was, at least. There’s that famous painting of her, like she’s in the lie-down bath of death, drowning. I saw it on Wikipedia.

That wasn’t it. When I looked up at her, I was taken aback.

She was ridiculously beautiful.

Her slightly wavy blonde hair. Her straight nose. Her pale, smooth skin. Her long arms and legs, and a figure I could tell was impressive even through her clothes. She wore an olive colored jacket zipped up to her neck, along with jeans and lace-up boots.

I think she was my age, or maybe a little younger. Looking down at me with her sparkling indigo eyes, she asked, “Is it already messed up?”

“I-Is what?”

“Your head.”

“I-I think I’m still fine.”

Or so I replied—But was I?

Maybe my head was already messed up. A beauty like this saving me on the verge of death? If you thought about it, it really was too convenient. What was this? A middle-schooler’s delusion, or a hallucination I was seeing on the brink of death?

While my mind was still spinning, she said, “So, where is it? The thing that messes you up if you see it?”

She asked in such an easy-going tone, I pointed despite myself. Before I'd realized it, sensation had returned to my limbs. They were still numb, but I could move them somehow.

"That way... Uh, hold on, what are you planning to do?"

Once she had sat me up in the water, she stood up in the middle of the grass.

"No, I'm telling you. It's dangerous!"

"Blech, you're right," she said, squinting and sticking out her tongue at something unpleasant. "That's it, huh? Gross."

"No, not 'gross.' I'm telling you, you can't look."

When I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her to a crouching position, I ended up looking directly at it again.

The faded sea of grass spread out as far as the eye could see. In the fields of the Otherside, dotted with dark groves of trees and ruins, there was just one thing that stood out, moving.

It was shaped like a person, if you stretched them vertically.

It was an inscrutable shape, like a long shadow cast on the ground by the setting sun had been peeled from the ground and then stood up.

It was white in color. A dirty white, reminiscent of smoke.

That white, lanky figure stood in the middle of the waterlogged, grassy field, twisting its body around. Was it dancing, or was it in pain? *Kunekune, kunekune*. It wriggled.

While watching those movements, my mind gradually went blank, and I started to feel sick. Despite that, I still had the feeling that I had to see more.

It felt similar to trying to remember a half-forgotten dream when you wake up in the morning. That niggling sense that you should remember it, and you almost can. It torments your brain.

"Urgh..." I groaned, letting go of her arm. With a lurch, my body began to fall over, and I leaned on her jeans-covered leg for support.

While I was taking shallow, repeated breaths, she plopped a hand down on my head.

"Hey, looking at that thing makes you feel super weird, huh?"

"Urgh."

"What happens if you keep looking?"

"I-I dunno..."

"Yeah, I guess you wouldn't."

Her tone made it sound like it was no big deal for her, but there was no way she was fine. *Huff, huff*. I could hear her breathing quickly.

"Ahh, this is rough. Whew... But I think I'm starting to get it... I wonder what's waiting at the end of this feeling..."

"Eagh..." I couldn't even respond properly anymore. Her breathing

was getting more and more ragged, too. It felt like her body was swaying just a little, but I couldn't be sure whether it was her or me doing it.

"It—It's closer... than before... we've gotta... run." I just barely managed to get those words out.

The white shadow had surprisingly little depth, so it was hard to grasp how far away it was, but I felt like it was closer than when I'd first encountered it.

My vision wobbled. The scenery in front of me looked unreal, as if it were being projected on smoke floating in the air. My head felt heavy, and I was about to lose consciousness, when the blonde-haired woman did a big windup and threw something.

The shining, sparkling, angular rock-like thing traced a parabola as it flew towards the white shadow.

The next instant, the white shadow twisted in place—then it vanished.

"Huh?" I said despite myself.

"What?! I... did it?"

From the way the blonde woman spoke, I wasn't the only one who was shocked here. Letting out a sigh, she looked down at me as I clung to her leg, and cocked her head to the side.

"That just hit it, right?"

I nodded. You could say it hit it, or more like it dispelled the smoke-like stuff that white figure had been projected on entirely.

"Wh... what did you throw?"

"A lump of rock salt. Rumor is, it works on things like that, so I gave it a try. It really had an effect, huh. Color me surprised."

Was that like spreading salt to exorcise spirits? It seemed too commonplace, so I wasn't sure that it made sense to me...

"Whoa, oh, oh," she stumbled, nearly falling over backwards.

If I hadn't supported her, she'd have ended up on her back in the water. Having regained her balance, she turned back to me and grinned.

"Thanks. You okay? That sure felt gross, huh?"

"Y-Yeah." The sickening feeling, the dizziness, and the numbness still lingering in my limbs rapidly dissipated. That feeling like I could almost remember something was gone, too.

"Can you stand?"

"Oh, yeah."

When I realized I was still clinging to her leg, I hurriedly moved away from her. I was a little unsteady on my feet when I stood, but it looked like I'd be fine. My soaked clothes were clinging to my skin and it felt gross.

"Um, thanks for saving me."

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, waving it off generously, and then introduced herself. “I’m Toriko Nishina. You?”

“Uh, erm. My name is Sorawo Kamikoshi.”

“So, listen, Sorawo. The place you came to this side from, is it close?”

Woah. She was suddenly addressing me with no honorific. Though I was put off by how forward she was being, I nodded.

“Yeah. Real close.”

“Nice. Can you take me there? I was a bit lost, you know?”

“Sure... T-Toriko.”

When I addressed her with the same lack of honorific, her face broke into a beaming smile.

“Hold on a moment. I’m going to go pick that thing up.”

With that said, “Toriko” went rooting through the grass near where the rock salt fell.

2

When I opened the door and passed through it, the air around me changed in an instant.

“Wah, it’s dark,” Toriko mumbled behind me.

The scene spread out before us was of an abandoned building in the evening. The roof and wallpaper inside were falling apart, and the gas stove and sink were blackened with dirt. Spread out on top of the dust-covered table were electric bills, water bills, and other bills, all browned to the point of illegibility.

When I turned around, the door behind us was already closed. It was the entrance/exit to the small living space behind a closed-out shop facing onto the shopping arcade. Normally, the door would have led into a narrow alley.

This was the passage to the Otherside I’d found.

Toriko looked around the room. “Where is this place?”

“Oomiya. East of the station—”

“Wha, in Saitama?! I didn’t think I’d walked that far.”

“Where did you enter from, Toriko?”

“Jinbouchou—in Tokyo. There must be something weird going on with space in there.”

I could hear noise from the shopping arcade outside: passing footsteps and the irritated ringing of bicycle bells. Each time the door to the pachinko parlor a few buildings down opened, I could hear the rattling of balls. Right—this was what was missing on the Otherside. The voices, the sound of cars, the slight hum of electrical apparatus, there was none of it over there. Only the sound of wind making the trees sway, or the occasional cry of a bird or insect; no sound

indicating human activity.

That mind-numbing silence was something I had truly taken a liking to.

It was a quiet, peaceful world, one I had felt like I'd made all my own... but...

Suddenly, there was the sound of something scraping the ground, and I cringed despite myself. It was the sound of Toriko pulling back one of the chairs beside the table. Plopping herself down on the dusty seat, she let out a breath. After some hesitation, I likewise pulled back a chair and carefully took a seat, too. Across from me was Toriko's face in profile. I didn't know what she was thinking, but she had her elbow on the table, and she was gazing at the gas stove.

"How many times have you been?"

When I spoke, Toriko blinked as if waking from a dream, then turned to face me.

"About ten times, I guess?"

Seriously? This was only my third time.

"That often... So that's why you were so knowledgeable," I said.

"Nah, I'm not particularly knowledgeable."

"I mean, you took out the Kunekune. I didn't know it was possible to do something like that."

"The Kunekune? That disgusting thing had a name like that?"

"I dunno if that's its name, but... There's rumors like that, I guess."

"Looks like you're the knowledgeable one here, now aren't you, Sorawo?"

"I just had some background knowledge. I never thought anything like that actually existed." When I said that, it finally sunk in just how abnormal of an experience I'd just gone through.

The reason I had known about it was I was majoring in cultural anthropology at university; I was interested in modern day true ghost stories as a research topic. *Kunekune* was a ghost story that had started to be told—primarily on the internet—around 2003 or so. The narrator encounters a white shadow that wriggles unnaturally, and looking at it messes with their head—That was more or less how the story went. I felt like the entity I had just encountered closely resembled that ghost story.

But it wasn't as though I had thought the Kunekune existed. Cultural anthropology viewed monsters and curses as a theme for study, but it didn't believe in their existence, only saw them as an aspect of human culture.

"Well, look at this, then. Do you know what it is?"

Toriko fished through her pockets, pulling out something squarish. What she laid down on the table was a silver hexahedron with a length of about five centimeters on each side. Each face was smooth

like a mirror and reflected the room around us. The stripped wallpaper, the fallen ceiling, and the scattered garbage were all reflected clearly. However, the only thing not reflected in it were the two of us.

“Huhhhh...?”

Even when I tried looking at a different angle, or bringing my hand up close to it, nothing changed.

“...What is this?”

“It was on the ground where that thing from before vanished,” Toriko said, picking up the hexahedron and scrutinizing it. “How much do you think I could sell it for?”

“No, wait. What even is that thing?”

“I don’t know. I wonder. I never found the rock salt I threw, so maybe it turned into this.”

This was absurd. A mirror that didn’t reflect humans? Was that even possible?

Was it really okay bringing it back here...?

Though I felt uneasy, I couldn’t take my eyes off the object in Toriko’s hand. I thought I’d understood that the Otherside was an abnormal place, but the little hexahedron in front of me was an undeniable piece of physical evidence that shook my sense of what was real all over again.

It was about a month ago that I first found the Otherside.

Chasing the site of a real ghost story, I was investigating places people would have called haunted. I’d enjoyed playing at ruin exploration since my high school days, calling it fieldwork as I dove into all sorts of suspicious locations. Now, if we’re being literal about it, I was illegally trespassing, but... Anyway, while I was doing that, I found something inside this abandoned building. A door that led to an impossible meadow.

First, I propped the door open so it couldn’t shut, then I took two, then three steps in, and rushed back out. With just that, I returned home in a daze, unable to believe what I’d seen.

When I recovered and made a second go at it, I tried a bit harder, and I went five meters inside. My foot caught in the mud, I tripped, got covered in gunk, and then beat a hasty retreat.

The third time, today, I came dressed in proper outdoor clothes before going to the Otherside. Making use of my experience in ruin exploration, I wore warm clothes and shoes that were easy to move in. I was carrying too little equipment to be engaged in sports, and was dressed too lightly to be going mountain climbing, so I stood out pretty bad on the train. If I were seen walking around at night, I might have been mistaken for a burglar. Regardless, that was how I

mustered the courage to make a serious exploration of the Otherside.

To which I encountered the Kunekune, and I nearly died.

“Hey.”

While I was deep in thought, Toriko suddenly leaned over the table and peered closely at me.

“...What?”

“Why did you know about that place, Sorawo?”

“The Otherside, you mean?”

“Is that what you call it? Who calls it that?”

“I-I just came up with it on my own.”

Yeah. The Otherside was just a name I’d made up for it. In comparison to the surface world I had known all along, it was in the shadows, on the other side. That was about all it meant.

...Though, really, I was the one who wanted to ask how she had known about the Otherside.

I looked at Toriko again. Just who exactly was she?

“Toriko, you—”

“Sorawo, did you see anyone else over there?”

When she asked that, speaking over me, it killed my initiative.

“I didn’t. You’re the first person I’ve met on the Otherside.”

“Oh, yeah?” Toriko lowered her eyes, leaning back in her chair.

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Right, you mentioned a name earlier. Satsuki-san... was it?”

When I spoke that name, at that very moment—

Bam! The sudden, loud noise made both of us jump.

It had come from the back door to the abandoned building—the door to the Otherside which we had just come through. It seemed someone, on the other side, had struck the door.

The noise came just once, and that was it. Total silence followed. Maybe she’d decided to see what was up, because Toriko quietly got up from her seat, but I was the one closest to the door. I blocked Toriko with one arm, standing up.

What are you going to do? Not voicing the words, I simply mouthed the question at Toriko, stepping silently towards the door as I did.

I brought my face close to the peephole.

I recalled there were ghost stories where, in a situation like this, someone would be peering through on the other side. Half-expecting to encounter someone’s bloodshot eye, I hesitantly peeked through the hole.

...?

Blue.

The other side of the peephole was pure blue.

A world of blue that was neither the blue of the sea nor the blue

of the sky.

What was this?

“Hey, Sorawo...! How’s it look...?” Toriko asked in a hushed tone, and I turned back to answer her.

“I dunno. I can’t see a thing. It’s just blue—”

The moment I said that, Toriko’s eyes went wide.

“Get back!”

Even as she said that, she was undoing the zipper on her jacket, shoving her hand inside, and...

Out came the black luster of a handgun.

Ho...

Hold on—this was getting out of hand.

“Oh, it’s fine.” Seeing my expression, Toriko raised a hand as if trying to calm me. “It’s just a Makarov. I picked it up.”

Where?

“I’ve got a spare. I’ll give it to you next time, Sorawo. For now, though, it’s dangerous there.”

I don’t need it and, you’re the one who’s dangerous here... I was about to say, but I wasn’t reckless enough to argue with a woman carrying a gun. I quietly backed down.

Toriko held the gun in both hands as she approached the door. I didn’t know enough to tell if she was skillful or not, but the way she moved looked kind of pretty to me.

Pressing herself to the door, she peered through the hole. She stayed like that for a while, not moving.

“To-Toriko... san?” Trying not to agitate her, I called out in a quiet voice, and Toriko responded in a flat tone.

“It was blue on the other side, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Okay, then.”

Letting out a sigh, Toriko lowered the gun, slowly turning the doorknob.

“Wait, what?!”

Before I could stop her, Toriko opened the door wide.

The dusty air flowed in.

Was it a field of blue? No.

Was it the unexplored fields of the Otherside? No, again.

There was nothing there but a simple back alley.

“Huh?!” I rushed over, leaning out the door.

The endless expanse of the Otherside—it was gone.

A narrow, dirty alley between buildings. A case of beer with empty bottles in it, a garbage pail, an abandoned bicycle covered in rust. Easygoing Hawaiian music drifting in from the arcade.

It was hopelessly banal, a scene that was unequivocally of the

surface world.

“Whaa?”

I stood there in a daze.

It was gone.

My Otherside.

“Looks like we can’t use this entrance anymore... Wait, huh, whoa, wh-what’s wrong?” Looking at my face, Toriko asked in a confused voice. “Hey, hold on, Sorawo.”

Toriko tried to talk to me, but I just kept shaking my head.

I was about ready to cry.

It had been a completely undeveloped playground, my own secret place, and now I felt like it had been snatched away before my very eyes.

“Don’t make that face. I’ll take you to the place I went in through, okay?” Toriko said, sounding troubled. Then she walked over and reached out to stroke my head.

A pat on the head? What was she, some sleazy playboy? I was ready to clobber her.

Even as I was miffed at her internally, I opened my mouth to speak.

“That’s fine, but...” There was a whine in my voice. I cleared my throat and tried again. “It’s fine. I’m all right.”

When I pulled my head away, Toriko meekly lowered her hand.

In silence, the two of us looked at the threshold of the back entrance. There were no clues there that might allow us to speculate as to what had been there just now.

“If it’s blue, is that dangerous? It made you pull a gun...”

“I’ve heard about it. In that world, there’s all sorts of dangerous stuff, but they say the most dangerous is when it turns blue,” Toriko responded, the gun hanging at her side at about thigh level.

“Why? Does something attack you?”

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t have any experience with it, either. But...” Toriko suddenly let out an exhausted sigh. “I’m going to call it a day. I’d like to meet again. Give me your contact info?” she said as she stowed the gun in her jacket and raised the zipper.

Was it wise to tell her? This mystery woman with a gun?

“...You tell me, Toriko.”

“I don’t know my own number.”

“Can’t you just check your phone?”

“Didn’t bring it. I wouldn’t want to drop it on the other side.”

“...Ah!”

I panicked, pulling my own waterlogged phone out of my pants pocket.

Shoot. I’d forgotten.

When I fell into that tasteless water, of course my phone was submerged, too.

With a silent prayer, I pressed a button. There was a momentary flicker on the screen, then it powered on.

Thank goodness, I thought. But that relief didn't last.

"...What is this?"

Looking at the screen, I let out a groan.

The familiar icons and apps were nowhere to be seen. My phone, which had been dipped in the waters of the Otherside, had been reduced to a worthless machine that showed strange designs and a mysterious text that looked like Japanese, but was completely indecipherable.

3

I encountered Toriko Nishina again a week later in the university's cafeteria.

In between third and fourth period, I had just gotten out of the lecture for African History I, and was eating lunch. Out of nowhere, someone pulled out the chair across from me and sat down. *Wow, how rude...* I thought as I looked up. There was a face I'd never forget, even if I tried... That blonde woman who was in illegal possession of a firearm, waving at me.

"Heya."

I continued chewing on my chicken with grated daikon sauce, staring at Toriko, unable to say a word.

Today, unlike last time, she was in normal clothes—the kind you might wear around town. A white blouse with a long, blue pleated skirt. The only thing she was carrying on her was a leather tote bag. It was a simple outfit, but her looks were good to begin with, so she looked exceptionally good in it. As for me, on the other hand, I was just wearing the usual sort of thing you might wear when heading straight to class from a nearby apartment, then going straight home when you finished. It was a cotton shirt and... erm, whatever jeans were closest on hand at the time. I was carrying a cloth bag I'd been fond of since high school. There was a pretty big gap in our "usual" appearances...

Toriko stared straight at me with her sparkling eyes. "Don't you have any friends to eat with?"

"Would you leave me alone?!" When I got angry and responded despite myself, Toriko raised an eyebrow and got this happy look on her face.

Aw, crap. I didn't mean to respond.

I hated people who were good at teasing others like this. People

who thought it was okay to make fun of people for having no friends, or being unsociable, or being gloomy. Seriously, I wish people like that would leave me alone. There were people like that in high school, but when I ran into them right away in university, too, it was exhausting. I'd done my best to keep my distance from that nonsense, and it led to me being in May of my second year without being able to make a single friend.

I looked at her blonde hair, feeling exasperated. It was pretty, for a dye job. That pissed me off.

What was *she* doing here? How did she know where I'd be? Sure, I'd reluctantly told her what university I attended, but was she able to track me down with just that? I hadn't given her my number, my e-mail, my address, nothing. Scary.

"Let me ask you one more time," the mystery woman, Toriko, said.

I immediately knew she was talking about the Otherside. It was the only thing the two of us had in common, after all.

"Why don't you go by yourself?" I asked.

"Let's go together. Can't we?"

"It's not a matter of can or can't... What would we go there to do?"

"That thing we brought back last time, that weird mirror lump... There's this person who wants it, you see."

"Oh, that..."

It was a mysterious thing, so fair enough. Maybe someone out there would want it.

"They can want it all they like, there's nothing we can do about it. You only picked it up by coincidence."

"It wasn't coincidence. I know a way to get more."

"A way? Wait, you can't mean..."

As I was feeling a bad premonition, Toriko leaned in closer.

"The Kunekune, was it? Let's hunt that thing."

"Huh?!" I couldn't help but raise my voice.

Hunt it? That freaky thing that drove a person mad just looking at it?

Was this woman an idiot?

"The money's good, Boss."

"Bo—"

I half stood up, then realized we were starting to draw attention. I sat back down, and spoke to her in a quiet voice. "...Are you for real?"

"You bet. I went out and bought a bunch of seeds. Look." Toriko rolled a lump of rock salt across the table. "See? Let's find happiness together."

"You're serious..." I whispered, dumbstruck, and by the time I

came back to my senses I was shaking my head hard. “No, no, no. No way, no how. I don’t want to go anywhere near that thing ever again. I nearly died, you know.”

Besides, would that rock salt even work? Okay, sure, it did vanish when she threw rock salt at it last time, but still.

Toriko lowered her eyes pathetically, bringing a hand to her chest.

“I could die out there on my own. That’s why I want you to come with me, Sorawo.”

“Why me?”

“Because you seem trustworthy.”

“How?! We’ve only met once! How can you know—”

“Today makes two times.”

When my brow furrowed, Toriko smiled. “You manage to fix your phone?”

“Huh?”

“It was broken before, right?”

“Not yet, no. I don’t have the money.” I didn’t have anyone to call me, either, so I’d spent the whole week trying not to think about it, and it was still the same as before.

“How much do you think one of those mirror stones is worth?”

Toriko asked, leaning in as if to tell me a secret, so I reluctantly lent her an ear.

“...How much?”

The price she named left me flabbergasted. I could buy myself all the smartphones I wanted and still have change left over.

As I stared back at her vacantly, Toriko grinned. “We’ll split it even. 50-50.”

“Seriously...?”

Yeah, she was serious.

We headed out of the university together, getting on the Saikyo Line at Minami-Yono.

Along the way, I got depressed trying to come up with ways to talk to someone I didn’t really know, but, surprisingly, Toriko didn’t try to start a conversation. We stood next to the train door, looking out the window in silence. It seemed she was in a good mood, because she was kind of smiling. It didn’t feel particularly awkward; I’d been expecting her to be annoying and keep trying to talk with me, so I felt a little let down.

It was easier this way, yes, but this only made me more curious about her. There was a lot I wanted to ask her, but how could I bring it up...? It had been a seriously long time since I’d been interested in another person, so my conversation skills had gone to pieces. After riding on the shaky train, a lot of ‘uh’s and ‘um’s said only inside my

head, we changed to the Marunouchi Line at Ikebukuro and alighted at Ochanomizu with me, ultimately, never having said a word.

The place Toriko led me to was a building in Jinbouchou.

It was a tall, thin building with a bunch of shops in the back of Book Town. Ten floors in total.

“Here...?” I looked up at the building dubiously. “Is this really okay?”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine. Let’s go.”

Watching Toriko’s back as she headed into the building after that brief answer, I grew hesitant.

I wasn’t good with her type. It felt like I’d been targeted by a delinquent.

The reason I begrudgingly followed her, even as I thought that, was that I didn’t want to lose my connection to the Otherside.

Ever since I discovered its existence, the Otherside had been everything to me. I mean, wouldn’t that be true for anyone? If you found a secret world, all your own, where you could be free from all the bother, the entanglements, the nuisances of life, who *wouldn’t* want to go there?

Or maybe I was wrong about that.

Either way, it wasn’t that I couldn’t have resisted Toriko. Not at all.

Oh, fine. Whatever happens, happens.

I finally steeled myself, stepping into the building. We passed through a grimy entrance and got in the elevator. When the door closed, Toriko pressed the button for the fourth floor. We didn’t get off when the elevator reached the fourth floor, and she pushed the button for the second. Next it was the sixth. Like she was inputting a secret code, she pressed the buttons for floors in a ridiculous order.

This was the kind of thing you’d get upset at a child doing while they were fooling around, but Toriko’s face was dead serious.

“...What are you doing?”

“If you press the elevator’s buttons in a certain order, you can go to another world,” Toriko answered without her hands stopping.

“Knowing you, you’ve heard that story before, right, Sorawo?”

“...I have.” I nodded. Yeah, I’d definitely read an urban legend like that online. *That sounds kind of childish*, was my first impression, so it didn’t really draw my attention. However, the trend in online stories about how to reach another world had stuck with me.

Who could have known I’d be taking part in one of them?

Third floor, second floor, tenth floor... The elevator busily moved up and down. Each time it stopped at the designated floor, Toriko immediately pressed the Door-Close button.

The fifth floor. When the door opened, a woman rushed towards

us from the opposite end of the hall. Her hair was long and black, and her face wasn't visible. That was because, before I could get a closer look, Toriko pressed the Door-Close button.

"Um, the person just now was trying to get on, you know?" I said, faulting her despite myself, but Toriko just shrugged it off.

"She always tries to get on on the fifth floor."

"...Always?"

"On the fifth floor, a woman is guaranteed to attempt to get on, but you absolutely must not let her."

What? That's scary.

First floor, third floor, eighth floor.

The corridors of the building that I saw through the gap in the opening and closing door changed like a slideshow.

Second floor, seventh floor, tenth floor.

Under the flickering fluorescent lights, a door with ground glass windows opened, and a pair of women's shoes came out into the hall. A man in a suit who was walking backward came to a stop and started to turn. The elevator door closed just before he could, and the scene in that hall was cut off.

I gradually came to realize how bizarre things were. We were traveling back and forth between a limited number of floors, and yet I never saw the same thing twice. Each time the door opened, an unfamiliar hall stretched out before my eyes.

"...Hey."

"You figure it out?" Toriko cast me a sidelong gaze and smiled. Who did she think she was, looking at me like she understood everything? When I glared back at her, Toriko blinked as if she was confused.

I felt like the pace with which the door opened and closed picked up a little. Looking at the control panel and the floor number display, I was shocked. I couldn't read the numbers. They should have been written in familiar Arabic numerals, and yet at some point those had been swapped out for some writing system I didn't know.

The elevator finally came to a stop after some time had passed.

When the door opened, it was pitch dark. I couldn't see a thing.

The light flooding out of the elevator looked like a smushed quadrilateral shape cut out of the ground.

"To... Toriko, you sure this is okay?"

Toriko had her head cocked to the side. "Huh? Did I mess it up?"

"Huh?"

"It was never this dark before."

"Whoa, whoa..."

"Weird. Wonder if it's night on that side."

Though I was exasperated by her less than reassuring response, I

leaned out of the door.

My head shot back with incredible speed. I tottered backwards, trying to retreat, and my back struck the elevator wall.

“Close it!”

The moment I shouted that, Toriko punched the Door-Close button with her fist.

In the instant before the door shut, I heard the chilling skitter, skitter, skitter of legs, and I thought I saw claws.

Muscular fingers ending in thick, split claws with a ridge in them. It left only a momentary impression, and then the door shut out the darkness.

The silent elevator shuddered, then surged into motion again. Rising.

“What... What was that?” I finally managed to ask, tripping over my tongue a bit. “Did you see that just now, Toriko, it—”

When I turned my head to look at her, Toriko had drawn her gun and had it pointed at the door.

“Wha?!”

“Wah! Don’t startle me.”

“That’s my line! Could you not pull a gun like it’s perfectly normal?!”

“It’s not like I have it on me all the time. It’s just, I was planning to meet with you today.”

“Why would you need it to meet me?!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Calm down. *It’s okay.*” That last part was in English for some reason.

“*Not okay!* I mean, where did you pull that from?! Do you keep it naked inside your tote bag?!”

“Sorawo, the way you talk is funny.”

“Huh?! How?!”

“You’re in a hurry to make a witty retort... I dunno, you sound like one of those people making a fuss on Twitter.”

“...?!?!?!?”

While I was left unable to speak as I was struck by a whirling mix of confusion, shame, and anger, the elevator came to a stop once more.

As we watched, the door parted to the left and right. Toriko gave a satisfied nod.

“Good. We made it this time.”

Outside the door was the roof. On the other side of a floor made of broken concrete tiles, there was a waist-height iron fence, and above it a cloudy sky.

“Let’s go.” Toriko stepped out.

“Hey, is this really okay?”

"It's okay, maybe."

"Ahhh, I don't think so."

I was super intimidated, but being left behind by Toriko was an even more frightening proposition. Steeling myself, I headed out.

Moving away from the elevator, we approached the edge of the building. The clammy wind made my hair sway.

The iron fence around the roof was rusted, and I wasn't about to try leaning on it. Touching it slightly, just to confirm it wasn't going to suddenly give way, I peered over the edge.

Beneath the haloed sun that cast a somewhat blurred light, a field of dull yellow grass spread out as far as the eye could see.

The vast plain was uneven, appearing to rise and fall like there were waves. Here and there, there were seemingly artificial structures. Buildings covered in ivy, massive stones scattered about haphazardly. What looked like the wire-frame of a tower for carrying electrical lines poked its head out from the other side of the dark woods. Were those train tracks cutting across the marsh? Even further away, there was a range of low mountains.

"What do you think?" Toriko said, sounding proud for some reason.

"...Well, it looks like we're not in Jinbouchou anymore, at least." I turned around, surveying the roof. There were no stairs. Only the elevator door.

"How do we get down?"

"Over here."

When I followed Toriko, there was a ladder at a break in the fence.

"Huh...? We're going down this?"

"Are you afraid of heights, by any chance?"

"Well, no, but..."

I was fine with looking over the edge of the roof, but if I had to climb down the side of the building using a rusty ladder, that was another matter.

"It'll be fine. I mean, I've never fallen," Toriko said rather irresponsibly. I glared at her.

"I'm gradually starting to see how you operate, Toriko."

"What do you mean, how I operate?"

"You think you can just worry about trouble after it happens, don't you?"

"It may not seem like it, but I'm thinking about all sorts of things."

"Oh, you are...?"

While I was hesitating to say more, Toriko stepped onto the ladder.

“I’ll go on ahead. If I’m down below, you won’t have to worry so much about falling.”

“Because you’ll catch me?”

“Hmm, you’re more optimistic than I expected. I only meant I could at least cushion your fall.”

“...No thanks. If I come falling down, get out of the way.”

The creaking ladder was scary, but I somehow managed to get down to the ground without falling and turning Toriko into a pancake, or having her dodge out of the way and getting turned into one myself.

While clenching and unclenching my tense, tired fingers, I looked around the area.

There was black dirt exposed in the area around the building, a narrow footpath stretching out into the tall grass.

I’d noticed this while descending the ladder, but this building was both similar and dissimilar to the one we’d initially entered.

For a start, it had no walls. Just pillars, and the floors and ceilings of each level. It was a hollowed-out ruin, with only the skeletal frame remaining. There weren’t any stairs, or even a shaft for the elevator.

Okay, so where did we come from, then? There was no floor on the first floor, just the bare earth.

Toriko walked over towards a drum that had been left by one of the pillars. When I followed her and peeked inside, the inside of the drum was scorched black. There were a bunch of concrete blocks piled up haphazardly nearby, perhaps having been used in place of chairs.

“Did you light a fire here?”

“Before, yeah.”

There was a rusty brown shovel leaning against the opposite side of the pillar. Toriko took the shovel in hand, thrusting it into the ground in the corner of the mountain of concrete blocks.

She dug in two, three times, quickly finding whatever it was she was after. Crouching down, she pulled something wrapped in a white vinyl bag out of the ground.

“Here.”

“Huh, what’s this?” Presented with some unknown object, I hesitated. Toriko wasn’t pulling back the package, though, so I reluctantly took it, unwrapping the bag.

“...” I stared down at the thing I had unwittingly accepted.

“It’s a gun.”

“Th-That’s obvious, just looking at it.”

A Makarov. Was that what she’d called it? It was the same kind as Toriko was carrying. The bag also contained a cardboard box filled with bullets.

“...Why are you giving this to me?”

“I promised last time, didn’t I? I think you’ll need a weapon.”

It’s scary, I don’t know how to use it, I can’t shoot, I don’t need it..

There were a whole bunch of counterarguments that popped into my head. And yet, not one of them left my lips.

That was because the thing I’d seen in the elevator was seared into my memory. Some clawed thing, skittering towards me from deep inside that dark floor. I didn’t know what it really was, but if that thing came at us again...

“...I’ll take it.”

“Mm-hm.” Toriko nodded, then filled in the hole quickly.

From there, she taught me how to load bullets, and how to disengage the safety. Based on what she was telling me, it wasn’t all that difficult, though I had no confidence I’d hit anything if I fired.

“Do you want to test it?”

“No, that’s fine. It’s scary.”

“If you suddenly try to shoot when you’re in a situation where you need to, you’re going to fail.”

“I said it’s fine.”

I reengaged the safety, and after some hesitation, I stuffed it in my bag.

“Sorry, I wish I had a holster or something for you, but this gun’s just a thing I picked up.”

“Where?”

“This side. They’re just lying around occasionally. Maybe the military came through here. I’ve never seen them, though.”

I’d considered the possibility that other people had come into this world, but the military?

If so, wasn’t it possible we’d suddenly get shot?

While I was feeling less and less sure about all this, Toriko reshouldered her tote bag. “Okay, let’s go,” she said cheerily.

“Y-Yeah.”

We walked away from the building and into the grass. Our destination: the place I’d met Toriko.

Our goal: Kunekune hunting.

4

“Maybe we should’ve gotten changed before coming after all,” Toriko said as we were heading down the footpath. I was in agreement with her on that; we were not dressed for walking around outdoors today. My outfit wasn’t so bad, but Toriko was wearing a frilly skirt that left her legs exposed.

“Why did you come in that outfit to begin with?”

“I mean, I figured we had to come here before the sun set.”

“Why?”

“It’d be scary if the sun set here, right?”

When she said that, it occurred to me—I hadn’t spent a night in the Otherside yet.

“When night comes, what happens?”

“Dunno.”

Her saying that so easily took the wind out of my sails.

“You’ve been here ten times now, haven’t you? Was it in the middle of the day every time?”

“Because I was told not to come at night.”

“By who?”

“A friend.”

“What happened to them?”

“They’re gone now.”

Toriko answered my questions in few words, without turning around. Had they come together? Why was that person gone now?

Was it Satsuki-san?

It made me wonder, but I was hesitant to ask again. I could see a stiffness in Toriko’s back as she walked in front of me, and I got the feeling she didn’t want to talk about it.

We trudged down the path in silence. A footpath—without someone coming and going, this sort of path wouldn’t have come to exist in the first place. If people stopped walking this way, it would be covered by grass in no time. That was assuming my common sense applied here in the Otherside, though.

The sky was blue, Toriko had no shadow, and the wind blowing through the grass was chilly.

I was alone with a person I didn’t know, setting foot into the unknown.

A woman in fluttering clothes, walking through a field of dry grass. I had a feeling I’d seen an image like that in a commercial before.

...What was I even doing? Where was this?

Watching Toriko walk on without turning back, I started to feel a little bit lonely. “Hey. We had only met once, so what was it that made you think you could trust me?”

Toriko responded without looking back. “Hmm. Well, you didn’t report me to the police, for one.”

“Huh?”

“About the gun. I was sure the cops were going to turn up. Why didn’t you report me?”

Don’t ask me why.

“I didn’t want to get involved.”

When I answered honestly, Toriko skillfully turned around while

still walking and pointed a finger in my direction.

“That. That’s what I thought I could trust about you.”

“How so? I may not be the one who should be telling you this, but I don’t think that’s a quality you should be looking for in a friend.”

“But it’s perfect for an accomplice, you know?”

“...”

I remembered something that I had read somewhere. The words of a criminal who’d been to prison. When an amateur criminal was stuck in the same room as a professional criminal, the professional would ask them all sorts of questions, and then when they were released, they’d use the info to shake them down.

Was I being taken for an easy mark because I hadn’t gone to the police?

“Did you know? They say that being accomplices is the closest kind of relationship in the world,” Toriko said, still pointing at me, a smug look on her face.

“I don’t know. Oh, and don’t point at me.”

“Oh! Sorry.” Toriko quickly withdrew her finger. “Was I bothering you?”

When she sounded so uneasy asking that, I was at a loss for how to reply. Something like, *Don’t say that now.*

“Well, it’s fine, but...”

“Thanks.” Toriko nodded in apparent relief, then spun back to face forward again.

What was that response for just now? I hadn’t agreed to being her accomplice.

While I was struggling to find a response, Toriko moved right on to the next topic. “Oh, right. Now that I think of it, what kind of places was that Kunekune monster supposed to appear in?”

“Whaaa, you’re asking that now? We’re heading for the spot where you met me now, aren’t we?”

“Well, you know, I was just thinking that you’d probably know what sort of places it lives in, Sorawo.”

“I don’t know if it lives in them, but, hmm...”

I recalled the details of the internet horror story that I reread after returning from the Otherside last time. There were a number of famous encounters with the Kunekune, but the thing they all had in common was...

“...The countryside, maybe? I say that because a lot of the stories involve someone who’s visiting the countryside from the city encountering it.”

“There’s a lot of countryside. Could you be more specific?”

“Sandy beaches, or rice paddies.”

“Hmm. What even is that thing anyway?”

“I don’t know. Wait, shouldn’t that have been the first thing you wondered about?”

“You’re a specialist, aren’t you, Sorawo?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Can you budge on that a bit?”

Don’t be unreasonable. It wasn’t like I was particularly knowledgeable about it, either.

“Hmm... Before I learned about the Otherside, I had thought the Kunekune was a variant on a snake horror story. The name is kind of snaky, and it appears in the rice paddy, which is spot on. In Japan, snakes are a sort of harvest god, right? In some of the stories of the Kunekune, it was connected with scarecrows, which was super suspicious. You see, the *kaka* in *kakashi*, or scarecrow, means snake in Japanese. It comes from the *kaga* in *yamakagashi*, which is a type of snake. Though, now that we’ve actually met it, the Kunekune wasn’t snaky at all, huh. Come to think of it, there was another famous internet horror story set in the countryside: Hasshaku-sama. It’s about being attacked by a 240 centimeter tall woman wearing a white dress. Just from the name, which means eight feet, you can already see it’s pretty long, huh. It shares being white with the Kunekune, too, so I’m thinking that maybe it’s also a snake god. Maybe the same person created both...”

I rambled on about whatever came into my head for a while, then snapped back to my senses.

What was I doing? I was clearly talking too much. While I was thinking I’d probably weirded her out, Toriko suddenly came to a stop.

“...Sorawo.”

“S-Sorry.”

When she spoke in a low voice, I reflexively apologized.

“No, not ‘sorry,’ look...”

Toriko pointed up ahead of us.

“Uwah!”

When I looked where she was pointing, I let out an unintended cry of surprise.

About five meters ahead, I could see a human-like figure lying across the path. It was blocked by the grass, so it hadn’t caught our attention until we got close.

Even though we were close to it, it didn’t stir.

Cautiously, I gauged the situation. It looked like it was a man in a white dress shirt. Dead, perhaps? The arms were thrust into the air, bent, and reaching for his face. His skin was blanched. In contrast to his arms, his legs were thrown haphazardly outside the path. His face was hidden by the grass so I couldn’t see it.

“...He’s not going to attack us if we get close, right?”

I was joking a little to try and dispel the tension, but I immediately regretted it, as I imagined a vivid mental image of the desiccated corpse sitting up.

Toriko slowly walked forward.

“Wh-What are you going to do?”

“Investigate, what else?”

Cautiously, she approached the corpse. It didn’t spring into motion. Though I wondered just what kind of grotesque sight awaited, I peeked into the grass to see his face.

“...What is this?” I said in monotone.

I couldn’t make out the man’s face at all. On top of the fact he was covering his face with both hands, there were these twisted, see-through protuberances that seemed to have grown out through the gaps between his fingers with an incredible vigor. The things were a translucent white, long, and had rounded tips. In some places they also branched out, reaching further. They looked both like delicate glasswork and like fungal filaments. They shook each time the wind blew through the grass, and they sparkled.

“Never seen this before,” Toriko mumbled to herself in bewilderment.

They were so mysterious that I found myself staring intently at them despite how gross it all was. Though the translucent protuberances were like mushrooms growing out of the corpse, it seemed they hadn’t grown from the surface of the face, but had erupted through the skin from inside the head. The teeth peering through his blanched lips were translucent, and meshed together like some sort of complicated puzzle. If the bones of his skull were disfigured and then they grew at random, would it end up with a result like this?

That was when I came to a frightening realization and shuddered. The man’s hands weren’t only covering his face. They were poking deep into his eye sockets.

“Hm? What’s this stench?” Toriko twitched her nose. Then, a little later, I detected it. There was an intense smell of raw fish, wafting in from somewhere...

We both came to a total stop and looked at one another, gulping.

The wind had stopped. It was so silent you could hear the buzz of tinnitus in your ears.

When I timidly raised my face, there was a white wavering thing that was rising up in front of us. It was like a madly twisting humanoid figure on the other side of the heat haze produced by the road in summer.

The Kunekune... had come.

“Urgh...”

Immediately struck with dizziness, I looked down.

Stealing glimpses of it out of the corners of my eyes, I tried to grasp the Kunekune’s shape. The lanky humanoid silhouette really did resemble a snake, like I’d thought. There were a number of rounded growths, connected by thin, string-like sections, but if I tried to focus my eyes on it, I instantly was hit with nausea.

“Th-This really is tough, huh,” Toriko said, her voice filled with revulsion. I warned her, didn’t I...?

“A-Are you okay? Should we run away after all?”

“No, no, we came here for this, so we’ve got to do it.” Digging through her tote bag, Toriko produced a lump of rock salt.

“Yoh!” With a silly shout, Toriko threw it. Her aim was precise, impressively so, and the rock salt was sucked into her target. And then...

Nothing happened.

Only the sound of the rock salt rolling across the ground. I hadn’t seen whether it bounced off or passed through.

“Toriko-san.”

“...”

“Toriko-san?”

“...Huh?”

“No, not, ‘Huh?’! It didn’t work!”

“Aww, geez. Well, if that’s how it’s gonna be...” Toriko pulled the gun from her tote bag, snapping into position.

Whuh? Whuh? While I was panicking, there was a loud gunshot.

“Eek!”

I ducked my head and Toriko kept firing. The sound of gunshots was sucked into the sky. Then, some seconds later, they came back as echoes. She didn’t hesitate to open fire. What was with her?

After a number of shots, Toriko stopped firing and cocked her head to the side.

“Huh?”

“Hold on?!”

There was no change in the Kunekune. I couldn’t even be sure she’d hit it. Toriko’s shooting form was solid, so I couldn’t imagine her missing completely, but the inscrutable smoke-like form of the thing was still doing its *kunekune* dance, the same as ever.

“Naw, I think its movements have gotten a little slower?”

“That’s a lie! Nothing’s changed! This isn’t working at all, is it?”

“M-Maybe if we shoot it a bit more—”

Before Toriko could finish, I was hit by an even more powerful dizziness.

“Urgh...”

I couldn't stay standing and fell to my knees on the spot. Toriko did the same. The hand she held her gun in was pressed to the ground, and she was shutting her eyes tight with pain.

If I so much as took a glance at the Kunekune, that bizarre sensation would strike. Like I'd almost figured something out, but understanding it would ruin me. I lowered my face, calling out to Toriko.

“Can you move?”

“...No. My legs gave out. You?”

“It's not looking like it.”

“Well, shoot. Sorry. What do you think happens now?”

“I dunno, but no matter what it is, it's not going to be good for us.”

While we were crouched down on the ground, talking, I could sense the Kunekune getting closer.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap, oh, crap. What now?

“To-Toriko, status! We've got to verify the current situation!”

I only said that to suppress my own panic, but Toriko was quick to respond.

“Okay. Status, unable to stand. Unable to run. Horribly dizzy. Rock salt and gunfire ineffective. Anything else?”

Her report on the situation was surprisingly calm, and that helped me settle down a little, too. Swallowing my spit, I replied. “Also, looking at that thing messes with your head... I'm not sure I'd call this 'okay.'”

“What do you think happens when it messes with your head?”

“There's something... that it'd be really bad to understand, and it makes you feel like you're about to.”

“What exactly does that mean? You're going to have to be more concrete here.”

“Could you not be so unreasonable?! It's something you're not supposed to understand, so there's no way I could concretely explain it to—”

That's when I remembered. During my first encounter with the Kunekune, on the verge of my head getting all messed up, I'd felt like I managed to grasp something.

“...Toriko. This is just a possibility, but maybe if we don't avert our eyes, and we keep looking, we might have a chance.”

“Do you seriously mean that?”

“We've already driven that thing off once. I was even more far gone that time. If we can recreate the same situation, maybe the same thing will happen.”

“Even though our heads will get messed up?”

“It’s necessary. It’s like matching wavelengths. If we’re going to hunt creatures from the Otherside, I think we’re going to need to come to terms with the rules and logic of this place.”

Toriko went quiet for a little while, then spoke with resolve.

“...Got it. I’ll do it with you.”

“No. Don’t look, Toriko. I’ll do the looking.”

“Why not?”

“If we both go crazy, we won’t be able to make it back. If I look like I’m about to go nuts... figure something out.”

This was nothing if not an unreasonable demand, but Toriko nodded without even hesitating.

“Okay. I’ll do something.”

“...Thanks. Please do.”

And so, I raised my face, and I stared straight at the Kunekune.

“Urgh... guh.”

That aberrant shadow had come closer than I’d thought, and I spotted it immediately. It was a shock like being punched hard, right in the brain. At the same time, the sense that I could almost understand was rapidly rising.

“This is bad, I’m gonna puke... Ulp.”

I groaned, I threw up, and then words I’d never intended to speak started to spill fluently out of my mouth.

“Uh, uh, according to, my brother, it was when the green had grown thick. What were all, all, all those people in pure white clothes doing in a place like that? W-W-W-With a totally unnatural bending of his joints, my brother, j-j-j-just-ust-us-ust.”

“So-Sorawo?”

“The sun rises! B-Before noon, a lukewarm wind will blow. No longer in my brother’s voice, the thing that seethed up right behind me. Scratching the tatami mats with bare feet, an incredible ocean of grays—”

I didn’t have the presence of mind left to worry about what bizarre words I was spouting. I couldn’t look away from the Kunekune. It was like it had seized my eyeballs and locked them in place. Just a little more, just a little more, and I’d understand...

It started to shine in front of my eyes. The edges of my field of vision were eaten away at with blue, as if someone had spilled a bottle of ink. The world was distorted as if I was looking through water. Left, then right, it swayed. Though only vaguely, I realized something was changing in my body. And so, I learned that the strange translucent thing growing out of the corpse we’d just found, it was trying to grow out of my face.

I opened my mouth to scream, and the translucent protuberance twisted and grew out of it. My teeth jiggled, I sensed them going soft,

and all at once I felt my sanity being carried away...

—Then, at last, I understood.

The Kunekune reflected in my swaying vision moved as if it were sliding along the surface of the foreign body growing out of my face. It was very similar to the plankton-like patterns that appeared in my eyes when I stared up into the blue sky. Basically, it looked like the Kunekune was standing there, but it wasn't. Like how white blood cells in the eyeball appeared to be floating when they were projected on the blue sky. The Kunekune was, in fact, a completely different thing being projected on something that was between us and the world. This foreign body was connected to whatever that was.

I understood something else, too. The reason that, the first time I'd encountered the Kunekune, Toriko's rock salt had been able to drive it off. That was because I recognized something the Kunekune was projected on. When I looked at that thing and recognized it, the rock salt hit it. If I didn't recognize it, there was nothing there!

"I get it! I get it! I get it! I get it!!" I kept on shouting. I couldn't have stopped if I tried. I just shouted "I get it!" over and over, as if I were screaming it.

Then, suddenly, pain rushed through my cheek as if I'd been slapped. Toriko was in front of me. The hand she was holding the gun with was stretched out towards me, trying to wipe away the foreign body that kept on growing. It infected the fingers that touched it, turning them translucent, and they were beginning to become disfigured, but she didn't seem to care.

Oh, hey. She's a better person than I thought.

While I was looking at her face, beautiful even as it was distorted by desperation, thinking about things like they had nothing to do with me, Toriko must have gotten impatient, because she grabbed my head with both hands, and shouted in my face.

"You're getting too much, Sorawo! Come back!"

With those words, my mind was suddenly clear.

Oh, right—if I went any further, there was no coming back.

With my body moving slowly, as if I was in a dream, I pulled the gun from my bag, and I tried to take a stance... No dice. I couldn't aim. My hands were limp. I should have practiced like Toriko said to. Inhaling, I shouted:

"Toriko! Shoot! Shoot the Kunekune!"

Toriko looked me in the eye, then gave a big nod. She let go of my face, readying the gun as she turned and faced the Kunekune.

She pulled the trigger.

With the dry echo of a gunshot, a hot bullet rushing forth from the muzzle, it struck something between me and the world, a membrane on which the Kunekune was projected, and shattered it.

The sound, the heat, they seemed to blossom like a flower, and then rapidly shriveled.

That thing folded up like origami, folding and folding... until it turned into a tiny lump, and then fell to the ground. Taking the Kunekune with it.

“Whew.” Letting out a huge sigh, I dropped the gun.

Instantly, I brought my hands to my face. That foreign body that had been growing voluminously out of my mouth and face was no more. With heaving breaths, I slumped to the ground in a daze, then turned my face to look at Toriko. When I saw her hands were back to normal, too, I was relieved.

Then we got super scared.

“Uwahhhh!”

“Wahhhh?!”

We both screamed in unison, scrambling to our unsteady feet. While I was hurriedly picking up my gun, Toriko nearly tripped as she rushed over to where the Kunekune had been and got down on her hands and feet.

“Found it!” Jumping to her feet with a shout, Toriko had the mirror stone that was reflecting the sun in her hand. It was something, folded into a cube.

We hadn’t talked over what to do, but we both turned on our heels and high-tailed it out of there.

With the horizon being dyed purple at the edges, the darkness of evening was on its way.

We raced through the wind-rustled grass, out of breath. The further we got from the scene, the harder it was not to laugh.

“That was scary! Suuuuper scary!”

Toriko shouted, “But we did it! We hunted a Kunekune! We did it, Sorawo!”

“That was so crazy! Seriously, give me a break!”

It reminded me of when I was still young and innocent, and how, after playing until I tuckered myself out, I would race across the gold-stained field towards home.

Toriko and I both laughed as we ran. Incoherently. Like we were insane. Like children.

The tears came.

Thank goodness we didn’t die. Thank goodness we didn’t go crazy.

“Sorawo, when we get back, let’s have a party!” Toriko suddenly said.

“Huh?!”

I reacted with surprise, and Toriko happily went on.

“There’ll be money coming in, so let’s celebrate! I’ve never had an after party before, you know!”

What, she hadn't?

"...Well, I guess I don't mind."

"Yay!"

These plains were a place I had wanted to monopolize for myself. Even now that I knew they were more bizarre and dangerous than I had initially thought, I still felt the same.

But now, if it was with this strange woman, I was starting to think I wouldn't mind playing together.

File 2: Hasshaku-sama Survival

1

In one of the older department buildings on campus, I was being pushed against the wall in a dark corner under the stairs.

It was raining outside. With her hand on the wall as she peered into my eyes, the light behind her made Toriko Nishina's blonde hair seem to glow ever so slightly.

Afternoon classes had already started, and there wasn't a soul around. Voices repeating Chinese words could be heard from a nearby classroom.

That was the lecture I should have been attending.

"Hey..."

"Don't move."

With a serious expression on her face, Toriko brought her hand to my chin, turning it to the left. Her face came in closer, practically brushing my nose.

What, what, what? What was with her? Was she going to bite me?

As strong and forceful as Toriko was, I might still have been able to push her away or beat her up. Being the refined university girl I was, though, it took time to work up the will to do these things. I was at the point where my slowly filling resort-to-brute-force progress bar was at about sixty percent. While a system message displaying "Emotionally preparing for launch of counterattack..." appeared in my head while my back was pressed to the cold wall, Toriko suddenly spoke.

"So pretty."

"Huh...?! Wh-What are you saying, out of nowhere...?" While I was caught off guard and flustered, Toriko took aim with her phone and, *flash*, she took a photo.

"Look at this."

On the screen of her phone was me, brow furrowed and looking this way.

One of my eyes looked kind of weird.

"Your right eye's super blue."

Toriko was right. It wasn't any ordinary blue, either. It wasn't the color of any living creature... It was artificial, like a mineral—the deep azure of Ryukyu glass.

When did that happen...?

While I was dumbstruck, my mind unable to keep up with what was happening, Toriko brought her left hand up in front of me. As if she was showing off her nails, or was a noble lady demanding I kiss the back of her hand, but it seemed the correct answer was closer to the former.

The fingers of Toriko's left hand were all see-through. Her shapely nails and the flesh beneath were as transparent as the clear winter sky. It was as if her fingertips just melted into the air.

"Whoa, how'd you do that?!"

Toriko angrily shook her head. "This isn't something I could do myself, obviously. It's gotta be that thing's fault. The Kunekune!"

The other world that was unlike our own, the Otherside. We'd encountered a creepy creature called the Kunekune there, taken it out, and come back alive. That was three days ago.

I'm pretty sure the discoloration of my eye was caused by staring at the Kunekune. That thing caused bizarre changes to the human body just by being looked at, after all. As for Toriko's left hand... Could it have been caused when she tried to scrape off the fungus that was growing out of my face with her bare hands? When I thought it happened because she was trying to help me, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty.

"Let's have someone who knows this stuff take a look," Toriko said after thinking for a while. "I know someone with an interest in the other world, someone who's researching it."

"Oh, yeah...?"

"It's the person who wanted the mirror stone—that thing the Kunekune dropped—in the first place. I'm going to be meeting with her so I can sell it anyway, so let's go together."

As I listened, the furrows of my brow deepened. An Otherside researcher? And she wanted that weird thing from the Kunekune?

No matter how you looked at that, she wasn't normal. This wasn't a cult or something, was it...?

"What're you making funny faces for, Sorawo?"

"Listen, if I'm being honest, this sounds dodgy as hell. Toriko, this person isn't taking your money, is she?"

"If anything, I'm taking hers. If I find something odd in the other world and bring it in, she'll buy it off me. I'm ripping her off like crazy," Toriko said with a smile and a hair-pulling gesture.

My brow only furrowed more.

"You don't want to, Sorawo?"

"...Okay, I'll go with you," I reluctantly answered. If Toriko was being tricked by someone, I'd have trouble sleeping at night if I abandoned her. But if they were working together against me, I was done with her. In preparation for that, I decided I'd leave my beat-her-

up progress bar at sixty percent.

“Great. Don’t worry, this should work out nicely for you, too, Sorawo. The money’s good, you know?”

...Make that seventy percent.

2

Walking through the rain, Toriko took me to a high-class residential district a short walk from Shakujii-kouen Station on the Seibu Ikebukuro Line.

It was a three story house surrounded by a tall brick wall. The whole of it was covered in ivy, giving it a bizarre atmosphere.

This is the kind of place the local kids would definitely call a haunted house.

When the door opened, the entryway was made with old-fashioned tile, and one pair of Crocs sandals were neatly lined up there.

The moment we entered the house, the temperature instantly dropped. Beyond the threshold of the entrance stretched a dark corridor. I couldn’t see far; when I squinted, a white shadow cut across the end of the hallway.

“Eek!”

I almost grabbed on to Toriko, but managed to stop myself just short of it. Fortunately, she didn’t seem to notice. Leaning in towards the hallway, Toriko raised her voice. “I’m heeere!”

“You’re so noisy. I know. Get in here already,” came a brusque female voice from deeper inside.

Toriko stripped off her boots and headed in, traipsing down the hall without hesitation. I hurried after her. How many years was it since I’d been in someone else’s house?

Opening the door that was at the end of the hall on the left revealed a dim, cluttered room with several LCD monitors and what looked to be a young girl. She was sitting cross-legged on a chair. In her hands she held a large mug with art by Tove Jansson printed on it. Judging by the scent wafting from it, it was filled with hot cola.

In the light of her multi-display setup, the girl looked as pale as an antlion. Her free-growing, messy hair had been drained of color, too. She wore a baggy T-shirt and leggings, her feet bare.

How old was she? She looked like she could be in primary school, but the eyes turned on me had none of that childlike innocence.

Toriko entered the room as if she were used to doing so. The hall and entrance were so empty that it would be easy to assume the house was vacant, yet this room had books and junk piled everywhere. With care not to knock over any of the accumulated things, I followed

Toriko in.

On top of a tower of computer books with animals drawn on the covers, there was a self-enlightenment book of the type they sold cheap at Book-Off. Next to those, a yellowed booklet on regional history shared space with a specialist magazine on modern architecture. Hanging from the ceiling were a model of an irregularly shaped polyhedron and a strange paper airplane. I had no idea what kind of specialist she was supposed to be.



Looking at me, the girl raised an eyebrow. "Who is that?"

"Sorawo. My friend."

"You have a friend...?" When she heard Toriko's response, the girl's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "How much did you buy her for?"

"I didn't buy her. She came free!" Toriko said, pursing her lips. Who was she calling *free*?

Toriko moved some books off the sofa and plopped herself down. Then, patting the spot beside her, she looked up at me.

"Have a seat, Sorawo. No need to be shy."

"What are you saying? This is my house, you know."

"Erm..."

When I hesitated, it seemed to finally occur to Toriko that she should introduce her.

"This is the acquaintance I was just telling you about: Kozakura. She studies the other world and cognitive science..."

"Wait, what did you tell her about me?" The girl named Kozakura turned a suspicious glance in our direction.

"That you know a lot about the world on the other side."

"I know a lot, huh..."

Having said that in a sarcastic tone, Kozakura turned to me and gave me a halfhearted nod.

"Sorawo-chan, was it? Please, have a seat."

I did as she said, sitting down next to Toriko immediately. As I did, I was running mental simulations on the best way to punch Toriko out and run for it if I had to.

"Since you've brought her to me, does this girl have something to do with the other world, too?"

"Yep. Met her over there."

"My condolences."

When she said that with a serious look, I didn't know how to respond. Ignoring my bewilderment, Kozakura turned to Toriko.

"And?"

Toriko held her hand up right in front of her eyes.

"...What? You want me to kiss the back of your hand now?"

"No, that's not it. My fingers. Look at them."

Moving her eyes, Kozakura frowned.

"Blech, disgusting. This isn't contagious, I hope."

Even as she said that, Kozakura never looked away from Toriko's hand.

"It's not just me. Look at Sorawo, too."

"Hmm?"

Kozakura rolled her chair over to me, peering into my right eye.

"Is it artificial? No? Hmm, what's going on here?"

She spoke while staring into my eye, so I was forced to look her in the eye as I responded, whether I wanted to or not. “Um, well, in the Otherside—oh, the Otherside is just what I decided to call it, but, anyway—over there... we encountered it. That thing. The Kunekune. Do you know it? The famous internet horror story. You look at it, and it drives you crazy. I looked at that thing for a long time, and at some point, without realizing, I ended up like this. Um, yeah.”

My face was burning. I could tell my back and armpits were dripping with sweat.

Yeah, that’s right—I was always super shy around other people. Looking someone in the eye and speaking in a logical way when we’d just met for the first time was way too difficult for me.

Kozakura continued to look at me for a while, then looked away. “And you, Toriko?”

“I touched the Kunekune and ended up like this. Well, not the Kunekune itself. Sorawo had been affected by it, and...”

Toriko explained how we first met, and the incident with the Kunekune to Kozakura. Hers was a perfect, logical explanation, unlike mine.

Why is it I can talk normally with her, I wonder? I looked at Toriko’s face in profile, captivated by that mystery, until Kozakura’s angry shouting pulled me back to my senses.

“You’ve both had an encounter of the fourth kind! Yet you come in here, uninvited, and start touching everything!”

“Hey, you said to come in.”

“Shut up, you idiot!”

“Um... What do you mean, the fourth kind?” I asked hesitantly.

“A long time ago, Hynek divided close encounters with flying saucers into the first, second, and third kind. The concept seems equally applicable to the other world, so I’ve adapted it. The fourth kind refers to cases in which the encounter has an effect on the body.”

That the previously unsociable Kozakura suddenly became so talkative left me feeling daunted.

“The first kind are simple sightings, the second kind are incursions, and the third are encounters with a living creature. As the degree of contact deepens, people are entranced by the other world. They get addicted, and some never return...”

“Like Satsuki,” Toriko mumbled to herself. Kozakura frowned and went silent.

“Isn’t that...?”

Toriko looked at me, then hesitantly responded. “The person who disappeared on the other side. My... friend.”

When she said that, I remembered. Toriko was looking for someone—for her *friend*.

“Satsuki was originally my friend, actually,” Kozakura explained between sips of hot cola. “We were in the same class in university. I don’t know where she learned about it, but she noticed the existence of the other world, and then dragged me into a ‘collaborative research’ project on it.”

In that case, this woman of unknown age is at least old enough to be going to university?

“So, Kozakura-san, you also, um... went to the other world?”

“No, I hardly ever went myself. In fact, I was always warning her not to because it’s dangerous. When I did, soon enough, she said she’d found herself a spirited assistant, and she brought Toriko in.”

When I looked to her, Toriko continued the story.

“Satsuki was my tutor. I never went to high school in Japan, so I got into university by taking a high school equivalency exam. That’s how we got to know each other. Eventually, she started to teach more than just my studies—she taught me about the other world, and I ended up exploring it with her...”

Toriko’s brow creased with sadness as she continued.

“It would have been three months ago, I guess. That’s when she suddenly stopped contacting me. I thought she might have gotten hurt on the other side, so I went alone to search for her a number of times, but...”

“I told you going alone is reckless, didn’t I?” Kozakura grumbled.

“Come on, she’s my friend. The way I see it, if she’s in trouble, I’ve got to help her. —Right?”

When Toriko said that as if it were self-evident, the strong-willed light that filled her eyes was daunting, and I looked away despite myself.

...Her tutor and her precious friend, huh.

I didn’t really get it, but I was angry for some reason.

Without looking at Toriko, I spoke to Kozakura. “Kozakura-san, what exactly is the other world?”

I managed to speak normally. When I was mad, it seemed my mouth would move, and I could get some momentum going. Maybe I should just stay angry forever.

“What do you think?” Kozakura turned the question back to me.

“I... At first, I thought it was an illusion only I could see. Until I learned other people could enter that world, I’d always been suspicious of it somehow.”

“I see. It’s not the case we have multiple people sharing the same hallucination. If you get mud on your boots over there, they’re still muddy when you get back. Whatever is over there, it’s real in some way.”

Kozakura put her mug down in a space on the desk then leaned in closer.

“The other world acts in a way that appears intimately tied to human cognition. From Toriko’s explanation of the ‘Kunekune,’ I can hypothesize its very existence is dependent on the subjectivity of the one who encounters it. In the past, I suspected the other world might be a virtual space. However, the fact it is possible to bring objects back from over there, and the changes you two experienced to your bodies serve as powerful proof to the contrary. Furthermore, a number of the items I’ve gathered from the other world thus far are—though I’m not fond of saying it this way—unable to be explained by existing science.”

“Come to think of it... That stone from before, I hear you were the one who put Toriko up to bringing you more?”

“Ah, yes, I’d almost forgotten. Toriko, did you bring anything?”

“Yep.” Toriko pulled a plastic container out of her tote bag.

Kozakura put on some disposable rubber gloves, carefully opening the lid and pulling out the contents of the container.

It was that mirror stone. The mysterious and bizarre object left behind when we defeated the Kunekune. The faces of the cube, which shone as if polished, clearly reflected the inside of the room. Except for the three of us. In that dark room, the mirror stone looked like it was wrapped in a silver halo.

“It’s bigger than the last.”

“Isn’t it, though? We worked hard for it,” Toriko said, puffing her chest up. I wished she wouldn’t sum our terrifying experience up as having “worked hard.”

When Kozakura opened a desk drawer, unceremoniously pulling out a bundle of cash, my eyes went wide.

“Good work. If you come across anything else, bring it in.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business.”

Without even counting the bills, Toriko stuffed them into her tote bag, then turned to me with a grin. It felt so unreal that I was struck dumb.

“So, what is this stone anyway?” Toriko asked. Kozakura looked thoughtful.

“Let’s hypothesize that the Kunekune is a living creature that gets inside humans through their sense of sight. ‘It’s better not to understand.’ In other words, if you recognize it—if you understand it—there’s no escape.”

Toriko cocked her head to the side. “If recognizing it let us shoot it, wouldn’t that be its weakness?”

“There could be varying depths of understanding. Those victims who ‘understood’ it sufficiently either became unable to move, or lost

their sanity. You survived because there were two of you. One to recognize it, one to shoot.”

In my head, I flashed back to the corpse that had been killed by the Kunekune. That man whose name I didn’t know, his fingers dug deep into both eye sockets. I knew now—he’d realized the Kunekune was moving around in his vision, and he’d crushed his own eyes. Though, even after doing that, he hadn’t been able to survive...

“When the Kunekune enters your cognition, that creates an interface for contact between the human and the Kunekune. When the Kunekune was in Sorawo-chan’s cognition, Toriko shot it, and that destroyed the interface. Or perhaps solidified it. Or perhaps crystallized it. In short, this may be Sorawo’s ‘cognitive interface’ in physical form.” Kozakura pinched the mirror stone between two fingers, lifting it up to eye level.

“My interface...?”

“Something like the skin that forms over milk if you let it get warm, I guess?” While I was confused, Toriko gave her clumsy opinion. “Why doesn’t it reflect humans though? Is it because Sorawo’s a misanthrope?”

I glared at her despite myself, but Toriko acted like she didn’t notice. Kozakura responded with a serious expression.

“That could well be the case. Or perhaps this mirror stone is reflecting the perspective of the Kunekune, which is trapped inside in some way.”

In the end, we didn’t learn anything that would fix my eye or Toriko’s hand. We tried asking Kozakura, but she said, “Don’t ask a cognitive scientist to do a doctor’s work,” and cut us off.

When we went outside, it was still raining. Standing beneath the eaves, I raised my heel and fixed my shoe.

A wad of 10,000 yen bills was thrust in my face.

When I looked up, Toriko had broken the band keeping the bundle of banknotes together and was smiling at me. Low clouds hanging in the background, as a blonde beauty pushed a large sum of money towards me—it was an incredible image, unlike anything I’d seen before, and I sort of stood there in a daze.

“We’ll split it down the middle. 500,000 each. That good with you?”

“...Yeah.”

I accepted it. It was money. So much money. Wow.

“Now you can get your smartphone fixed, huh?”

“Huh? Ohh, yeah.”

To tell you the truth, the first thing that came to mind was my student loan.

"I never did thank you properly, huh. Thanks, Sorawo."

"No, thank you..." I mumbled in response.

"When do you want to go next?"

"Anytime's... Wait, no, hold on." Finally recovering from the shock the wad of cash had inflicted on me, I continued on. "Nothing's been resolved at all. Not my eye, nor your hand. Shouldn't we have pressed her harder for answers?"

"If Kozakura says she doesn't know, she doesn't know. If she figures something out, she'll tell us. I guarantee."

"Can we trust her?"

"We can. Because Satsuki trusted her," Toriko said confidently.

"...You were awfully close with this Satsuki-san, huh."

"Yep. She was more important to me than anyone. If she's lost on the other side, I've got to go save her..."

I didn't know what to say. It was not unlikely that this Satuski-san had lost her life somewhere—just like that corpse which had crushed its own eyes. It shouldn't have been impossible for Toriko to imagine that.

While I was hesitating to speak, Toriko smiled sadly.

"To be honest, I was feeling uneasy. Satsuki had told me not to go alone... That's why, when I met you over there, I was super happy!"

"Uh, okay?"

"It occurred to me when we beat the Kunekune. It'd be hard for me to do alone. But if I'm with you, we might be able to find Satsuki."

"Huh?"

What was she saying?

"You want money, right? If you find strange things in the other world and bring them to Kozakura, she'll buy them off of you, like she did today. Oh, obviously I like money, too, so we'll split the take. It's not a bad deal, right? Win-win for both of us."

"..."

I stood there at a loss for words. So, what? Toriko caught me because she thought I'd be convenient help for finding Satsuki-san, or whatever her name was? Because she'd feel lonely skulking around by herself?

I felt the anger seething up.

Fine. I see how it is, I thought. If that's how Toriko wants it to be, let's hurry it up and find this Satsuki-san. Once we do, I can be rid of this nuisance. Then they can go be all buddy-buddy on their own.

"...Okay."

"I thought you'd say that!" Without a clue as to how I felt, Toriko smiled happily.

Just past 10:00 in the morning, three days later, I was reading a book on the first floor of the Shosen Grande bookstore in Jinbouchou when Toriko turned up late.

“Did I keep you waiting?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“Isn’t this where you’re supposed to say, ‘I just got here’?”

“Did you think this was a date or something?” I said curtly, heading outside without listening to her response. Toriko followed. It was raining outside, the same as ever, but neither of us put up an umbrella. We were dressed so that it didn’t matter if we got wet today. Toriko and I were wearing the same clothes we wore the first time we’d met. Me in my Uniqlo fleece, camouflage pants, and sneakers. Toriko in her army surplus jacket and jeans. She had lace-up boots on her feet.

“Sorawo, did you bring the gun?” she asked bluntly. Fortunately, no one was around to overhear and object, but I couldn’t help but speak in a tiny voice when I replied.

“...I did. Just in case.”

I’d bought a holster at a survival games specialty store, and it was wrapped together with the Makarov in my waist pouch. It was a leg holster, the kind that hung from your thigh. I’d bought exactly what the shopkeeper suggested.

We entered that tall, thin building from before, and headed for the elevator. I watched the order Toriko pressed the buttons in and took notes. Four, two, six, two, ten, five. When we got to the fifth floor, the woman with no visible face ran to catch the elevator again. It was so scary, I shut my eyes. One, three, eight, two, seven, ten... The numbers on the display changed to something unreadable at some point, and then eventually the elevator stopped on the roof. That pitch black floor we’d seen last time never appeared.

The door opened, and a damp wind blew in. I stepped out onto the empty roof with Toriko.

It was gloomy beneath the cloudy sky. There was no rain. Looking out from the roof, I could see the shadows of the clouds drifting across the uneven plains. At the distant edge of the mountains, there was a strangely angular cloud that looked like a blocking artifact. It sparked with lightning and showered that area in a torrential downpour. It was the first violent weather effect I’d seen in the other world, but it was a mystery that we couldn’t hear any thunder. All we heard was the howling wind and rustling of the grass. When I looked along the foot of the mountains, for a moment, I felt like I saw something triangular moving between the branches of the trees. It was too far off to figure out what it really was.

We descended the creaking steel ladder on the outside of the

skeletal frame of the building, then checked our equipment when we got down to the ground. Once I'd attached the holster to my thigh and felt the weight of the Makarov, I relaxed just a little. The fact that bullets had worked on the Kunekune played a large part in that. Like Dutch Schaefer said, "If it bleeds, we can kill it." ...Not that the Kunekune had bled at all, though.

Taking our experience from last time into consideration, I'd brought gloves, too; trekking gloves from Ikebukuro Seibu's sporting goods section.

Toriko had thick gloves with pads on the backs. They were called tactical gloves, apparently.

Once I was fully outfitted, I stood up. "So? If we're looking for Satsuki-san, where should we go?"

"I've been to the north and the east a number of times, but I never found her. When I went west, I met you. I think you'd know that area better than I do. Were there any signs of other people?"

"I wasn't really composed enough to be looking, but it felt like the marsh just went on forever. What else? Isn't there anywhere Satsuki-san was likely to have gone?"

"She wasn't exactly the type to discuss future plans..."

That surprisingly unreliable answer irritated me.

"Well, can I decide then? When I looked from up top, I saw something like a ruined building to the southwest. If you haven't been there, let's set that as our goal. If your friend's injured and unable to move, she might take shelter in a building with a roof, right?"

"Got it," Toriko nodded without objection.

Diverting from the footpath from east to west that passed in front of the skeletal building, we headed into the plains.

It had seemed to be close when I was looking down from above, but once we got walking it wasn't really. The whitish ruin we could see ahead of us just wasn't getting any closer. We continued to walk on in silence, occasionally consulting the compass. The needle sometimes twitched, or spun around as if confused before pointing to "north," though, which was kind of suspicious.

"Sorawo, are you in a bad mood or something?" Toriko, who was walking behind me, asked. "I hate when people aren't clear about things, so if something's up, say so."

"Not really. It just occurred to me you've put surprisingly little thought into this."

"What do you mean?"

"You're firmly resolved to save your friend, but it seemed like you hadn't put any thought into how you were going to do that."

"If you're going to call me out on that, yeah... I know in my head that I can't hurry too much, but when I think of Satsuki being in

trouble, I just can't sit still," Toriko replied in a troubled tone.

"Hmm. You seem awfully concerned for her."

"Because Satsuki was my only friend."

"Oh, yeah? Well, I hope you find her, then."

Toriko went quiet for a bit before speaking again. "...Hey, Sorawo, that isn't very nice."

"What do you mean, 'that'?"

"That sulky tone of voice! Could you stop acting like a child?"

I snapped, turning back to face her. "I ought to say—" It was just as I was about to give her a piece of my mind, when I suddenly heard a man's voice. It made me freeze.

"Stop!"

In the grass, not ten meters away, was a man I didn't know. Over his camouflage clothing, he wore a thick coat with dried leaves woven into it, and was carrying a big gun like I'd seen in the movies. One of those AK-something-or-others. He didn't have it readied—the barrel was pointing at the ground. He had a swarthy face full of stubble, and there was a glint in his wide eyes.

"Don't move!" Toriko shouted in a sharp voice.

When I looked, Toriko had her gun drawn, and was aiming straight at the man. The man stopped, taking his hand off the AK, and turned his palms to Toriko as if signaling for her to stop.

"If you go any further, you'll die. It's a glitch."

"A glitch? What's that? Whatever, just drop the gun."

"I refuse. I just saved your lives. Look."

The man slowly lowered his right hand, putting his fingers into a small bag hanging from his belt, and pulling out a metal bolt.

"Look closely," he said once more before tossing the bolt. It headed about a meter ahead of me.

Juban! There was a sound I'd never heard before and a flash of light. I closed my eyes reflexively, and my face felt hot.

When I hesitantly opened my eyes again, I gulped. The bolt was stopped in mid-air. The red hot metal was wavering on the other side of the hot air.

"What is this...?" Toriko whispered from behind me.

As we watched, the bolt blackened at the end and shriveled away. That wasn't how metal burns. It was like a match being struck. Soon, the entire bolt was a burned husk, and it fell to the ground. There was an area in the middle of the grass with a diameter of about sixty centimeters where nothing grew, and it was surrounded by ash.

I stumbled backwards. The blood drained from my face. If I'd stepped forward, who knew what would have happened? As I sunk to the ground, someone gently caught me from behind. It was Toriko supporting me.

The man reshoouldered his AK, the grass rustling as he approached.

“It’s a Toaster. You step into it, it’ll fry you to the marrow. It reduces things to ash in an instant, so you can’t even cook with it. The Zone’s full of these sorts of dangerous glitches.”

“Wh... What are glitches?”

“Dangerous spatial anomalies. Supernatural traps. Walking through an area with such poor visibility without confirming what’s in front of you is practically sui... cide...”

In the middle of talking, the man trailed off. His eyes were suddenly unfocused, and it wasn’t clear where he was looking.

“Mi... Michiko?”

“Huh?”

I turned, thinking there might be someone else there, but there wasn’t anyone else on the plains for as far as the eye could see. Toriko was watching the man suspiciously, too.

“Michiko, is that you? You’ve come back?! Why are there two of you...?!”

The man closed in, his face contorted with emotion. I was shocked, and struggled to get to my feet. Toriko took aim again and shouted.

“Calm down, old man! I’ll shoot!”

With the gun trained on him, the man came to a stop. Bewildered, he continued to speak.

“Michiko...”

“I’m not Michiko! Take a closer look, old man!”

Sanity gradually returned to the man’s eyes. “Ohh... Sorry, you two aren’t Michiko.” Shaking his head, he exhaled. “I got confused. I’m fine now.”

“Really?”

“It’s true. Please, lower the gun. I’m really fine.”

In contrast to his words, the man had a look of severe disappointment on his face. I thought he might start crying. We watched tensely as he covered his face with both hands, then let out a long sigh.

Toriko waited for me to stand, then slowly lowered her gun.

5

The man gave his name as Abarato. He said he’d come to the other world in search of his wife, who had mysteriously vanished.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been searching for my wife so long... When I saw you two, it seems I mistook you for her. I’m truly sorry.”

“Right...” I replied dubiously.

This went beyond a case of mistaken identity, didn’t it? Wasn’t it

kind of weird that he would hallucinate both of us were his wife at the same time?

Also, as he got closer, I realized something. The old guy stank.

I had thought his swarthy complexion was a tan or something, but he was all grimy. His hair was all stiff, too. I couldn't even guess how long it must have been since he'd last bathed.

"About how long have you been here?"

"This is my 38th day this time."

The immediate answer caught me by surprise. Toriko seemed not to have expected it, either, and asked him about it. "You've been spending that much time here? You don't go home?"

"I do go back, occasionally. When I need to resupply. Otherwise, I'm here all the time. There's no point returning to a world without my wife."

"You... You really cared a lot about her, huh."

I tried to say something harmless and inconsequential, but I magnificently failed to do so. Abarato glared at me, responding with indignation.

"No, it's not 'I *cared* about her.' I *care* about her. Now, and forever. Michiko is alive. She's waiting for me to save her!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

Seeing me cower, Abarato's expression softened a little. "No... I'm sorry, I lost my temper there. There's no point getting angry at you."

I looked at Abarato, still tense. This man had, in a short time frame, blown up and then apologized twice now. He was clearly unstable. He wasn't aiming his gun at us now, but there was no telling what might set him off.

"We were still newlyweds. It was an arranged marriage, but we bonded over our taste in movies, and became close in no time..."

Unprompted, Abarato launched into the story of how he and his wife, Michiko-san, had met.

"It was almost a year since we had gotten married. One summer night, we had been drinking beer and snacking on edamame after work, and we were about to watch a movie together. I went to my room, then called out to my wife in the living room, asking which movie she wanted..."

Abarato's words cut off.

"...There was no response. When I returned, my wife was gone. There was nowhere to hide in our tiny apartment. There wasn't any sign of her having gone outside, either. I was gone for maybe ten seconds. In that time, my wife suddenly vanished. Leaving no trace. Just a warm depression in the cushion she'd been sitting on, and a second beer she'd just poured."

It must have been painful to remember, because his voice

trembled.

“It took a long time for me to digest the situation. Once I had accepted the fact of her disappearance, I searched for her like a madman, but I had no leads, and no idea where to look for more. Grasping at whatever straws I could find, I consulted mediums and shamans. One of them told me... That Michiko had met with a *kamikakushi*.”

“Kamikakushi...” Toriko mumbled the word to herself, looking to me questioningly.

Stories about people vanishing without any warning were not uncommon in folklore. In old times in Japan, this was called *kamikakushi*, which means to be hidden away by the gods. People would be dragged off to other worlds, or wander into them, never to return. In the story of Samuto-no-Baba from *Toono Monogatari*, the girl who disappeared manages to return once, but then vanishes again. I hear that stories about being sucked into the “fourth dimension” were popular in the seventies and eighties.

When I was researching this, as part of my interest in true ghost stories, one thing that caught my attention was a rise in urban legends and net lore about entering another world. Where someone sets foot in a place similar to the world they know, but warped in strange ways when examined closer, making them flee in terror—these sorts of stories had seen a marked rise in the last ten years or so. There was a time when I had taken them as no more than “stories,” but now I was forced to acknowledge there was a shred of truth in them.

Though, as for whether I’d have believed in the other world before I saw it myself...

“And you believed that?” I hesitantly asked, to which Abarato nodded.

“My wife had been abducted by someone, she had evaporated of her own will, mental derangement, I looked into all the possibilities. Yet, none of them made sense to me. That being the case, I was forced to consider a preternatural cause. Someone had snatched my wife away from the world I knew. I investigated. In my search for a lead on where the victims of a *kamikakushi* were spirited away to, I pored through old stories, folklore, and legends. To find a way to contact other worlds, I apprenticed with a shifty shaman. I fasted, sat under waterfalls, did anything. Then, at last, I found the Zone.”

Abarato waved his hand, gesturing to the other world around us.

“The entrance was at an abandoned shrine in Chichibu. There were rumors that some youngsters had up and vanished while doing a test of courage at the place. I searched through the records to find if there was any truth to that, and I was able to locate one of the people involved in that test of courage and hear their story. While I was

investigating the site, for just an instant, as I passed through a torii gate, I saw a dry field of grass swaying, like some sort of phantasm. With repeated trial and error, I learned that by passing through that torii at a specific time and angle, it was possible to enter that field.”

While listening to his story, I became frightened. Abarato told the story plainly enough, but I couldn’t imagine how much time and effort must have been left out of this brief version of his investigation.

Abarato blinked, as if coming back to his senses, and then looked at us in puzzlement.

“By the way... Who are you girls? Why have you come here?”

“The same reason. An important friend went missing here.”

When Toriko responded, Abarato nodded repeatedly as if he understood. He started to get misty eyed. “I see... It must have been hard for you.”

Abarato strode over and took Toriko’s hand. My eyes bulged. She was so vulnerable as he closed in, Toriko hadn’t even had time to react. After an enthusiastic and one-sided handshake, Abarato turned to me.

“You came here together to find your friend, right?”

“Huh?! Erm...”

While I was mumbling, Abarato came to his own conclusions, nodding to himself once again. “I get it. Really, I do. You just couldn’t sit still. I was the same. You lost someone so precious to you, and no one else will understand. It’s painful, I know.”

“Um, er, well.” While I was at a loss for how to respond, I tried to catch Toriko’s eye over Abarato’s shoulder and was shocked. Toriko’s eyes were just as moist as his.

Hold on... What’re you sympathizing with him for?!

I came close to shouting that at her, but maybe it was only natural she would. The old guy was in the same position as Toriko.

I’m different.

While I stood there, unable to do anything, Abarato made a proposal to Toriko.

“You girls don’t seem used to the Zone yet. If you’d like, I can show you a safe route...”

“You wouldn’t mind?” Toriko asked.

“Yeah. I can’t just watch you girls walk into a glitch in front of my eyes.”

“You heard the man! This is great, huh, Sorawo.” Toriko turned to me, speaking with a flawless smile.

I could only nod.

“Always throw something ahead of you as you walk. If you have nothing to throw, poke at it with a long stick.”

Abarato took the lead, throwing bolts ahead of us as we walked. He had a carpenter or construction worker’s nail bag around his waist, and in it he said he kept a large supply of nuts and bolts.

“This world is full of death. There are traps everywhere, yet we can’t see them.”

Like he said, the bolts Abarato threw would fly up high into the sky as we watched, or be melted to slag, making the presence of a hidden glitch apparent.

Was it just good luck that neither Toriko nor I had tripped one yet...?

Abarato had his own names for the glitches. Buddhist Altar Rice was a glitch that was a white mass that looked like ground meat, jutting out of the ground in a cone. When approached, it let out an ear-piercing metallic sound that resembled that of a dentist’s drill. One that looked like a jungle gym composed of hair, a Mist Net, was almost invisible, and the bolt passed through it, too, so if there hadn’t been a bird’s feather hanging there, we would have walked right into it.

Glitches like the Toaster, where he actually knew how they functioned, were the minority. For many glitches, all he really knew was that something was there.

“You don’t try to find out?” I asked.

“Unless I need to in order to move forward, it’s faster to work my way around. I’m not here to research the Zone, after all.”

Kozakura would have taken an interest. As for me, whenever a new glitch appeared, I was fascinated to the point of wanting to stop and observe it. That said, even without Abarato’s warning, each glitch gave off a dangerous enough impression that I had no intent of approaching them.

“It’s not just glitches. There are strange creatures that roam the Zone. Some are like warped versions of animals and plants we know, while others are disgusting, and will make you vomit at just the mere sight of them. If you haven’t encountered any yet, you’re fortunate.”

“Haha...” I gave him a vague smile. What would this guy’s reaction be if he heard we’d come to this other world to hunt a Kunekune before?

Still, the thought that there might be other creatures that were even more disgusting made me flinch. Maybe I’d need to practice with the gun a little, after all.

The abandoned building we were heading towards gradually got closer. Its concrete surface was pockmarked, as if it had been riddled by heavy gunfire, and reminded me of a mass of coral that had turned

white after dying.

Toriko called out to Abarato, who was walking ahead of us. “Hey. I should have asked this first, but you haven’t run into anyone, have you? A woman. Tall, with long, black hair, glasses, and a nasty look in her eyes.”

Those features she described... was that Satsuki-san?

“Sorry, not ringing any bells. It’s rare to encounter other people in the Zone to begin with. And when I do spot them, I do my best not to approach.”

“Why?”

“Because it could be one of *them*.”

Abarato lowered his voice.

“They’re everywhere. Watching us. They’ll tap your phone, steal your mail. Follow you in groups to harass you. Spread bad rumors online. Reporting them is no help—they’ve infiltrated the police, too.”

Cautiously, Abarato continued.

“You two, are you safe on the other side? Have you ever been pushed from behind on the station platform? Ever had strange symbols written on your doorplate? They imitate humans, hiding in our society. Even if you blow the whistle on them, no one will believe you...”

Abarato continued, as if talking to himself. Toriko turned back, and we exchanged glances. I shook my head. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Um... who are ‘they’?”

“Denizens of the Zone. They sneak into our world, and they abduct people. They took Michiko!”

Abarato’s voice was distorted with anger and hatred.

Th-This is...

I gulped.

This incoherent suspicion—I hadn’t taken any credits in psychology, but I could still tell. Abarato wasn’t sane.

He was an emotionally unstable man, fully immersed in conspiracy theories, and he was carrying an AK.

Th-This guy’s bad news. Like, really bad. There’s no telling when he might decide we’re with “them.” We’d better not stimulate him any more than necessary... I was thinking, but then Toriko went and opened her mouth.

“How do you know we aren’t ‘them’?”

No, don’t say that!

I was sweating bullets, but Abarato’s response stayed calm.

“When I first spotted you two, I was intending to hide. However, as you approached, you seemed so very... human, I couldn’t help but call out to you.”

“We seemed human?”

“You two were arguing about something, right? As far as I’m aware, they don’t do that. They don’t have emotions like humans do, you see.”

I had complicated feelings about this. Basically, the only reason we didn’t get fried by the Toaster was that Toriko and I had been squabbling.

“You say that like you’ve seen ‘them’ before. Have you?”

Abarato gave a big nod. “Yeah. In the Zone, I’ve spotted what looked like humans a number of times. I thought it might be Michiko, or, if not her, someone else who wandered into this place, so I approached, but none of them were. One had human form, but stood there like a tree, never reacting, while another was like someone had tried to make a human out of clay, only to abandon it part way. They were strange beings...”

“And outside the Zone?”

“I told you already, didn’t I? In our world, they imitate humans. They laugh at me behind my back, then act like nothing happened when I turn to look. They step on my foot on the train, then treat me like a molester when I glare at them. They sneakily take videos, then put them online...”

Abarato’s words trailed off. He came to a stop, crouching low to the ground.

“Another glitch?” Toriko asked.

“No...”

Even as he said that, Abarato made no attempt to stand. Toriko and I, who had caught up to him, looked at one another.

“Look, there’s footsteps. Can you tell?”

Where Abarato pointed, there was a slight depression in the ground. I could see the grass was bent at the root. It looked like someone had pushed a pole down against it, but... was it a footstep?

Toriko crouched next to Abarato. She got down on all fours, bringing her face close to the ground, like a dog.

“Going towards that building, huh,” Abarato muttered. He meant the abandoned building we’d been heading for.

“Hey, Toriko. Looking at the footsteps, do they tell you anything?” I called out to her from behind. Toriko raised her head.

“I dunno, but... it could be Satsuki. Let’s go!”

Her eager response made me wince. I questioned what she could possibly tell from such an uncertain track, but seeing how Toriko looked, I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Oh, yeah? Here’s hoping.”

My response was colder than I intended, which disturbed me. Abarato stood up, and, without another word to us, started walking

again. I caught a glimpse of his eyes, which were glazed.

“Michiko. Are you there? Just wait, I’m coming to save you now...”

Mumbling his wife’s name to himself, he walked forward through the grass. Toriko stood up, too, and followed behind him.

I watched them from behind with a miserable feeling.

I knew. It wasn’t right to take out my frustration on her. Toriko wasn’t in the wrong here. She was just desperate to help her precious friend.

I’d placed my hopes in her, then started feeling betrayed all on my own—it was pathetic. Even though I was vaguely aware of that, I turned my unjustified anger against Toriko.

Tormented by feelings of alienation and self-loathing, I followed.

7

As we approached the white building, Abarato’s pace quickened, ultimately turning into what was almost a run. He’d been so cautious before, but it was like he’d completely forgotten about glitches now.

Toriko followed behind him, while I kept up with her, wheezing as I did so.

I was watching anxiously for Abarato to burst into flames, or get blown away, or die some other incredible death, but fortunately it never happened, and he reached the building unharmed.

The abandoned three-floor building stretched out horizontally, which made me think of a school in some way. Its wide open entrance had no door. It was gloomy inside, and I could vaguely see what looked like steps between thin pieces of lumber.

“Look! There’s no questioning it. The footsteps continue inside,” Abarato shouted, pointing to the grassless area which spread out in front of the building.

In the exposed ground, littered with chunks that had broken off and fallen from the walls of the building, there were depressions like the ones we had seen before. They did seem to head towards the building, as Abarato claimed, but I felt there was something off about the now much clearer details of the indentations.

They weren’t foot-shaped. They were circles, about thirty centimeters across, with straight-line patterns, like a typeface used on a high-quality inkan seal. The stride was maybe two meters.

No. There was no way these were footprints. Not human ones, at least!

“H-Hey, Toriko.” I tried to stop her, but even as I was calling her name, Toriko passed through the door following Abarato. Driven by rising unease, I went after her.

When I entered the abandoned building, the difference in light levels blinded me for a moment.

Toriko and Abarato had stopped just inside the door. The floors inside the building had all collapsed, leaving no ceilings, and dim bands of light that shone through the windows that lined the walls were all shining on a single human figure standing in the center.

It was a woman.

She was tall—very tall. Easily standing at two meters or taller, she wore a long, pure white dress. She was facing away from us, and her long, black hair cascaded down her back.

A single name flashed through my mind. Hasshaku-sama. A monster with a height of eight feet, so about 240 centimeters, and a female appearance, that attacked young men. She was a famous internet ghost story, just like the Kunekune.

“...Satsuki?”

When Toriko whispered that, I doubted my ears.

“Wha...? Your friend was that huge...?!”

“No—or she shouldn’t be, at least, but, somehow... I’m feeling nostalgic,” Toriko replied without looking back.

...Nostalgic?

Bewildered by the unexpected word, I hesitantly looked back to the woman. We’d made a lot of noise barging in. She couldn’t have failed to notice us, but the woman didn’t budge. She just stood there, her back turned to us.

The “bizarrely tall woman” was one template for a monster that had existed since long, long ago. Take the yama-bito women in *Toono Monogatari*, for instance. They were tall and had unusually long, black hair, a typical mark of a monster...

While I stared at her, I started to understand what Toriko meant. Even though the woman looked kind of massive and suspicious, there was this throbbing deep in my chest, and it was growing ever stronger. It was a loneliness that made me want to burst into tears, like the excitement of seeing someone you haven’t been able to for a long time.

When I rubbed my eyes, which had misted up on their own, I noticed something even stranger. For an instant, the woman vanished, and I saw something else there. It was a frame-like construct, made with two thin pillars overlapping... Did that make sense? I tried to focus on it, but it wasn’t working. I blinked repeatedly, and finally started being able to see the woman appear to overlap with that construct.

“...Toriko, that frame, what do you think it is?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where she’s standing, there’s something there, isn’t there?”

Toriko went silent a moment, then gently cocked her head to the side.

“I don’t see it. I don’t see anything.”

When she said that, it troubled me. I could see it so clearly.

The construct, which appeared superimposed over the woman, was supported by two straight pillars. The lower one didn’t touch the ground, and seemed to be floating slightly. The upper one had a number of horizontal bars intersecting it. Taken on the whole, it looked like a poorly balanced drawing compass, or a warped torii gate.

The true ghost stories I had read before flashed through my memory. Making metallic sounds and white flashes as they went up and down the mountain, the Compass Men of Hyougo... Several sightings of an inverted torii that traveled the mountainside late at night...

The pseudo-torii was outlined by a faint light, and it felt wrong, like a badly-shopped image. It was a silver halo—shining just like the mirror stone when I saw it at Kozakura’s house.

I was about to ask Toriko if she couldn’t see the light, either, but the two in front of me jumped a bit.

A moment later, I noticed, too.

The woman was turning.

Her black hair swayed fluidly, and her head, in its high position, slowly swiveled. Once it had turned to its left extremity, it stopped. The profile of her face, which was peeking over her shoulder, was obstructed by a screen of her hair, which made it hard to be sure whether or not she was looking in our direction.

After her head, it was her shoulders. Her left shoulder turned to face us, and then her long torso started to twist. Simultaneously, that inexplicable feeling of nostalgia, which had been tormenting me all this time, assaulted me as if the volume had just been turned up on it.

I want to go home. To go back. I want to see that person.

I felt something catch in my chest, and I came close to sobbing. Where was I going to go home to? Who was “that person”? I had no idea. Yet the emotion continued to rise on its own, even with no target.

The superimposed pseudo-torii moved at the same time as the woman. When one leg touched the ground, it pivoted on that point. There was a *po* sound from somewhere. It sounded like a bubble forming, or like when your ears popped from a change in air pressure. *Po, po, popopo*. I heard that continuous bubbling, popping sound, and at the same time, the space between the torii’s legs began to change color. It was gradually stained a deep blue. However, neither Toriko nor Abarato showed any reaction to that.

Oh.

In the blink of an eye, I had a sudden realization. If this pseudo-torii was only visible to me, then the cause had to be...

I closed my right eye as a test. Instantly, the pseudo-torii vanished.

I knew it.

I closed my left eye, looking with only my right. This time, it was the woman's form that vanished, leaving only the pseudo-torii standing there.

My two eyes were seeing two different things at the same time.

When the pseudo-torii pivoted, the blue light grew stronger. Whether I liked it or not, it reminded me of the time I first met Toriko. The world of blue I'd seen through the peephole in the door of that abandoned building in Oomiya which was connected to this other world—the blue leaking from that pseudo-torii was that same vivid blue. My sense of danger rose faster and faster. It was dangerous to be here, but I wanted to approach that blue light...

Then, Abarato, who had been silent all this time, suddenly roared. "Michikooooo!"

Without so much as looking at me, who was shocked Abarato fixed his eyes on the woman, his whole body shuddering. I was shocked.

"At last... I've found you at last. I'm sure of it."

"Th-That's her? It's not, right?"

"No, it's Michiko," Abarato declared. "Yes, Michiko wasn't that tall... and her hair was shorter... but I can tell. That's Michiko. Look, she looks more and more like her... She's getting shorter..."

Mumbling to himself, Abarato stumbled forward.

"H-Hold on!"

I grabbed his pack, trying to stop him, but Abarato walked on without looking back. His pack slipped from his shoulders, falling to the ground with a loud thud. Pulled down by the shoulder straps, his AK rolled across the rubble. Abarato continued walking, seemingly unconcerned.

"Ahh, I knew it... I'm sorry I made you wait, Michiko..."

With a tearful wail, Abarato dashed towards Hasshaku-sama.

Here's how it looked to my right eye. When he approached the pseudo-torii, Abarato's entire body was dyed in the blue light. There was this expression of shock on Abarato's face. Maybe he had realized the woman before him was not Michiko-san, or maybe he saw something entirely different in the blue light. Abarato stopped, as though frozen stiff...

And then he vanished.

A moment later, *po*, that popping sound reached my ears.

With a mix of danger and nostalgia, I stood there assaulted by a

whirling eddy of incomprehensible emotions. There was something inside me that envied Abarato for having disappeared beyond the blue light. My reason screamed at me to run, but my body didn't move.

Then it happened. Toriko, who was standing in front of me, began walking towards the woman. Instantly, I grabbed her arm.

"I have to go—Satsuki's there."

Ignoring her self-directed mumbling, I tightened my grip.

"It hurts. Let go, Sorawo."

"No can do. Stop."

Toriko shook her head. Ever since we entered this building, Toriko hadn't looked back at me once.

"Come on, it's Satsuki. She's right there."

"No, she's not!"

Seeing Toriko start to talk like Abarato made me shudder. For the two of them, Hasshaku-sama apparently looked like the important people they so badly wanted to see. It superimposed the image of someone close to its victim onto itself, then kamikakushi-ed its tricked prey—was that the kind of being it was? If so, why had I not been tricked by it? Because my right eye had seen its true form? Or because, unlike the other two, I had no one precious to me...?

Toriko was still trying to shake me off and head towards the woman. Repeatedly calling the name of her friend I didn't know.

"Satsuki is—"

Why you...!

The blood rushed to my head. *You don't know how I feel!* The progress bar of my feelings reached 100%, and the next thing I knew I was shouting.

"Don't leave me behind! You idiot!"

I wasn't used to shouting, and my voice caught in my throat, making me sound whiny and shrill. I'd let out such a pitiful voice in an attempt to get Toriko's attention.

"Don't leave me alone! Don't go...!"

What was coming out of my mouth was no more than childish begging.

But maybe it reached her ears—Toriko stopped.

Toriko stubbornly refused to turn and look back, so I reached out for her shoulder to turn her face in my direction, and—

"Sorawo, no!"

There was a shout from behind me, snapping me back to my senses.

"What're you doing?! You can't go near it!"

The voice calling after me belonged to Toriko. But why from behind me? She should have been in front of me...

I blinked in bewilderment, and suddenly I realized it wasn't

Toriko's arm I was holding.

It was Hasshaku-sama.

I was grasping the living arm of Hasshaku-sama.

"Ha..."

Then reality assaulted me from my left eye's view.

The feeling in my palm was cool, moist, and soft. Still unable to think, I looked up. The veins were visible through her smooth skin. Following the curve of that arm up the side of her dress-covered torso, beyond the wet luster of the black hair which cascaded over her bare shoulders, a set of arched lips peered out, and above their intense, rainbow color, my eyes were inevitably drawn to—

Suddenly, a gunshot rang out, knocking Hasshaku-sama's head back.

I ducked my head, looking behind me to see Toriko holding her Makarov with two hands.

"Get down!"

I didn't squat because I'd heard and understood the command so much as I was intimidated by the force of it. Toriko fired the Makarov three more times, then raced over to me.

"Come on, get up! Where were you planning on going, Sorawo?"

"Huh? Huh?"

While I was confused and unable to understand the situation, Toriko pulled on my arm, taking me away from Hasshaku-sama.

"Wh-What was I doing?"

"You ran after the old man. Mumbling nonsense to yourself."

With a furrowed brow, Toriko shook her head.

"Don't leave me alone"? That ought to be my line..."

Having finally digested the situation, I shuddered.

I'd let my guard down. It had tricked me, too.

This thing lured Abarato in with the illusion that his wife was there. It did the same to me. Taking advantage of my... feelings for Toriko.

What? How embarrassing...! I squirmed as an incomprehensible mix of terror and shame hit me.

The monster's overlapping images of the pseudo-torii and its female form showed no damage from Toriko's shots. It was still standing there. Its pull remained strong, so not only could I not run, it took all I had just to hold my ground where I was.

"Sorawo. How are we supposed to take this thing out?" Toriko asked me, as if that were the natural thing to do. Did that mean she trusted me? Wasn't she just sloughing responsibility off on me...?

Even as I thought that, I somehow managed to regain my focus and said, "I'm thinking about it now."

The nostalgia, the image of his wife which pulled Abarato in, the

form of the eight-foot woman, all of them were illusions. We were being made to hallucinate. What was it that was really here right now?

Hallucinations... Last time, the Kunekune tried to invade our bodies through our sense of sight. When it did, that created a hallucination in my perception regarding where the Kunekune was located. Could it be the same with Hasshaku-sama? When the creatures of the other world came into contact with humans, did they always cause some sort of hallucination? Or was I getting that backwards, and they were trying to make contact with humans by way of these hallucinations? It might be that their contact with my right eye was what allowed me to see their true forms now.

If so, it was worth trying the same method as before.

I focused strongly on the vision in my right eye. Hasshaku-sama's form faded, and all I saw was the pseudo-torii.

"Toriko, try shooting her in the head."

When I said that, Toriko nodded, and she pulled the trigger on the Makarov. The bullet struck one of the pseudo-torii's pillars and bounced off.

I knew it! If I recognized it, she could hit.

She fired a second shot, then a third. Each hit sent sparks flying, and small, stone-like fragments scattered. But...

"Is it working?" Toriko asked. I shook my head. The enemy's movements were unchanged.

"Okay, then we'll try this one."

Toriko re-holstered the Makarov, picking up Abarato's fallen AK. She removed the magazine, checking it before reattaching it, pulled the lever, then got in position.

She looked surprisingly good doing it.

While I stared admiringly at her, Toriko opened fire. The shots were far louder than the Makarov's, and I hurriedly covered my ears. A continuous spray of bullets tore into the stone of the pseudo-torii. It carved holes large enough to see into the stone surface. However, even after fully unloading on it, the injured pseudo-torii still stood there, continuing to turn. The blue light wasn't fading, and the feeling of nostalgia beating in my chest didn't weaken.

When I didn't say anything, that must have clued her in, because Toriko bit her lip.

"No good, huh..."

I desperately turned my head around, looking for anything else we could use.

If this kept up, I'd only be able to wait until I ran out of willpower and was pulled in. But bullets didn't work, and my right eye could only see it, while Toriko...

Ah!

An idea rapidly came together in my head.

“Toriko! That hand!” When I started shouting excitedly, Toriko looked at me like she had no clue what I was on about. “Your left hand! Take the glove off!”

“This? What am I going to do with it?”

Toriko took the tactical glove off, exposing her translucent fingertips. I grabbed her wrist, walking towards the pseudo-torii of my own accord.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Sorawo?! What?!”

I spoke rapidly as I tried to explain, “It seems my right eye is able to recognize the true forms of creatures in this other world.

Considering that, it wouldn’t be weird for your left hand to be the same, right?”

“T-True forms? Huh? What do you mean?”

Looking into Toriko’s confused eyes, I hesitated for just a moment, then I told her, “...Sorry, I’m gonna make you touch something weird. Forgive me, okay?”

“Huh? What? Hold on...”

There was no time to get her consent. I forcibly took Toriko’s hand, and I shoved it into the blue light.

“Grab that!”

“What do you mean, ‘that’...? Eek?!”

In my right eye’s vision, I could see Toriko grabbing the blue light.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What is this?! I can’t see it! What am I grabbing?!”

“I knew it! Now just hold on like that!”

In my excitement, I was shouting despite myself. This was just what I was aiming for. If my right eye could “see” the true forms of other world entities, then Toriko’s left hand might be able to “touch” them—that was my conjecture.

Toriko’s translucent fingers were digging into the light. It was an incredibly strange scene. How must it have felt? Toriko was wincing, trying to keep the rest of her body away from the left hand she was holding on to it with.

“Ew, this thing is all soft and moist! Hey, can I let go now?”

“Put up with it.”

“For how long?!”

I pulled my own Makarov from its holster, the unfamiliar action taking me a lot of time.

“Hold still now, Toriko!”

I turned the muzzle towards the blue light, then I squeezed the trigger as hard as I could.

There was a strong recoil, and I nearly dropped the gun. Still, I

couldn't possibly miss. I'd put a hole in the light, right next to where Toriko was holding it. A pitch black hole.

One moment later, *bobobobobobo*, there was a bubbling sound from that hole, and a black sphere erupted from it.

Toriko looked up, crying out in surprise. When I looked up, with my left eye, I saw Hasshaku-sama's tall body doubling over backwards. The bubbling sound trailed on, almost like a scream. The way Hasshaku-sama twisted violently, it was as inhuman as a balloon struggling as the air escaped and it deflated.

In my right eye, black orb after black orb spouted from the hole, then immediately vanished without a trace. Even when they touched my body, I felt nothing. In the time it took me to look at her with both my eyes, Hasshaku-sama shrank and faded. The eruption of spheres weakened... then stopped.

The next thing I knew—the whole area around us had changed. We were sitting on moss-covered stone pavement. It smelled of earth and greenery. I saw a dilapidated shrine, surrounded by thick grass. There was stone scattered around us. The remnants of broken torii gates. There was a gloomy forest around the area, and up above the tips of the trees I could see the evening sky.

I could hear birds and bugs. This was the surface world.

I stood up, looking down at Toriko.

"You okay?"

Toriko bent all the fingers of her left hand, glaring up at me.

"You made me touch something weird."

"I told you I would. How did it feel?"

"It was kind of like... a feeling that ruins people..." Toriko shuddered. "Ohh, I want to wash my hand."

"You think that shrine has water, maybe? Where are we?"

Toriko finally stood up, opening her smartphone.

"Blech. It's saying we're in the mountains of Chichibu."

"Seriously?"

Now that she mentioned it, I felt like Abarato said he'd entered the other world through a shrine in Chichibu.

There was no sign of Abarato nearby. He'd probably passed through the blue light to somewhere else. Kamikakushi—When I considered we'd nearly met the same fate, I felt terror, together with a lingering trace of that longing.

Toriko let out a resigned sigh, using the AK as a crutch to stand.

"It's a long way home. Hopefully we can catch a bus along the way, but... Huh?"

From among the shattered pieces of torii gates that littered the road to the shrine, Toriko picked something up. It was a woman's white, wide-brimmed hat. Had Hasshaku-sama left it behind? It had a

silver halo, and Toriko held it up in both hands, staring at it.

“...Don’t go putting it on or anything.”

When I told her that, and Toriko vaguely nodded, I could tell her mind was elsewhere, with another person who wasn’t here right now.

“Toriko, didn’t you think Satsuki-san might be there?”

“I did. I really wanted to go,” Toriko responded in a quiet voice.

“Why were you able to resist?”

“...Because I was worried about you.”

“Huh?”

As I asked her to repeat herself, unsure what she had meant, Toriko turned her face towards me and smiled.

“You seem so vulnerable, Sorawo. Like you’re going to go off somewhere.”

I’d never expected Toriko to say that to me, so I was struck dumb. Unable to respond with an, *I could say the same to you*, I just stared back at Toriko’s smile.

File 3: Station February

1

“All right, here’s to Sorawo-san and Toriko-san’s 2nd Other World Expedition! Good work out there! Cheers!”

“Yeah, yeah, cheers.”

Toriko clinked her mug against mine with so much energy I found it off-putting. She was drinking draft beer, while I had plum wine on the rocks.

This was our second time drinking together—we were having an after party for our other world expedition.

After learning about the existence of the “other world,” Toriko and I had ended up encountering bizarre monsters like the Kunekune and Hasshaku-sama.

The first time we drank together was on the day we came back alive after defeating the Kunekune. Toriko, who was keen to celebrate, dragged me into a nearby pub. She must have been exhausted, though, because she drank herself into a stupor in no time, and we weren’t able to have a proper conversation. Having learned our lesson from last time, this time we were having the party on a different day; it was a few days after our return, on a Friday evening.

“We’ll have the edamame, the potato salad, the chilled tomatoes, the five skewer set, the karaage chicken, the horse meat tartare, the daikon salad with wakame and small fry, and...”

Toriko was already ordering food.

“Also the seared mackerel sashimi, and... That’s about it, I guess. Sorawo? That good? Okay, that’ll do for now.”

“Uh, you ordered that stuff planning to eat all of it, right?”

“We’ll manage, somehow. There’s two of us.”

“Do you not remember what happened last time? You ordered all that stuff, then you passed out in the middle, and I had to eat it all myself.”

“I don’t remember.”

Oh, you...

“It’ll be fine today. I came prepared.”

“Prepared? For an after party?”

While I was thinking, *What, you had to prepare that much?* in exasperation, Toriko picked up a wasabi cream cheese hors d’oeuvre with her chopsticks and licked at it.

We wouldn't be going on an expedition today, so we were both dressed casually. I was wearing a parka and jeans, while Toriko wore her camo jacket with a denim skirt and tights.

5:00 p.m. The tavern had just opened for the night, and customers were still sparse. That said, this was a Friday night in Shinjuku, so it was going to get loud soon. When I thought about that, I knew I was going to be fed up with it soon.

I'd been to two or three parties since getting into university, but I wasn't able to keep up with the people around me, and it was exhausting. It was a lot easier with Toriko. If we were going to do this, maybe I should've insisted on a place with private rooms.

"Oh, yeah. So, about the hat we picked up after coming back from the other world. I took it to Kozakura's place yesterday, but she said it just looked like an ordinary hat, and she wouldn't buy it off me. What a cheapo."

"No, she's right. I mean, there was nothing unusual about it."

Toriko had an acquaintance, Kozakura, who was a cognitive scientist and was researching the other world. I'd only met her once, so I didn't know precisely how she was researching it, but she apparently collected strange items brought back from there. Toriko made a hefty sum off of that, and I'd been given a cut, too.

"But, Sorawo... That hat looked funny to you, didn't it?"

"It did shine silver a little..."

"Oh, yeah. Come to think of it, your right eye... did it go back to normal?"

Toriko leaned over the table, making me unintentionally lean back in response. It unnerved me having her stare into my eyes so close. I wished she'd stop. Toriko was insanely beautiful, so when she brought her face this close to me, it was a kind of violence, honestly.

"I-It took you way too long to notice. I just put in a color contact!"

The lapis lazuli color my eye had changed to stood out too much, so I put a black color contact in just my right eye.

"Aww, that's a waste. It's so pretty."

Toriko pursed her lips as she sat back in her chair. A faint, pleasant scent lingered in my nose, and I had no idea what to do about it. Tongue-tied, I tried to respond.

"We... Well, you're wearing gloves too, aren't you?"

Today, Toriko was wearing a thin pair of leather gloves. We were eating now, so she had taken just the right glove off. Still, though, just about anything looked great on her... It pissed me off.

"Everyone's surprisingly willing to pretend they don't notice, so it's fine. There was this guy who was sneaking photos before, and I didn't like that."

We survived our encounter with the Kunekune, but not unharmed.

My right eye, now discolored like it was some sort of gemstone, saw something other than the reality I saw with my left eye. It saw the... the truth of the other world. Toriko's fingers, which had gone translucent, were able to touch the... well, the matter of the other world. I hesitate because we had no idea what was going on. At the very least, though, my eye and her hand had gotten us through our encounter with Hasshaku-sama.

To borrow a term from Kozakura, we'd had an encounter of the fourth kind.

An encounter with the other world that involved bodily transformation.

"Sorawo, you want this hat?"

Toriko reached for the little box at her feet meant to put bags in, and she pulled a Ziploc baggie from her leather tote bag. Inside it, all folded up, was a woman's white, wide-brimmed hat. It was supposed to have a silver halo if I looked at it with my right eye, but in the tavern's lighting, I couldn't tell one way or another.

"No, no, I don't."

"Well, can I have it then?"

Toriko pulled the smushed hat out of the bag, then nonchalantly put it on her head. I was shocked, and raised my voice despite myself. "What made you want to put that suspicious thing on your head?!"

There was no way to tell what the nature of an object from the other world was just by looking at it. If Toriko had melted into a pile of goop the moment she put it on her head, what in the world would I have done?

In contrast to my fear, Toriko wore an easy smile. "Does it suit me?" she asked.

"Everything looks good on you! Now, please, take it off while we're eating!"

"Tch." Toriko removed the hat. The area where it had touched her head hadn't gone bald or anything.

The food she'd ordered came. Edamame, potato salad, chilled tomatoes, and daikon salad. I waited for the server to go away, then asked, "If the hat won't sell, aren't we in the red on this one?"

"Not at all. I brought the old man's AK back."

"Your voice is too loud."

"Nobody's listening, okay?"

When we defeated (if you could call it that) Hasshaku-sama, we'd brought the assault rifle back to this side. It was a Russian-made AK or something. It belonged to this middle-aged guy, Abarato, we'd met in the other world. We couldn't carry it openly, but while I was wondering what we were going to do about it, Toriko skillfully disassembled the gun and hid it in her luggage.

“But there’s no bullets, right? You fired them all.”

“I’ve got a little ammo I picked up in the other world that I’m still hiding. I think we can use some of it. That gun was an AK-101. 5.56 ammo isn’t that unusual.”

When we talked about this dangerous stuff like it was perfectly ordinary, I felt like my sense of normalcy was getting messed up, too.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, but where’d you learn to use a gun?”

“Overseas,” Toriko answered curtly, and I furrowed my brow.

“In a terrorist camp or something?”

“Ahaha. Nothing like that.”

“Hmm. Well, if you don’t want to say, that’s fine.”

“What’s it matter? You never talk about yourself, either, you know?”

“You’ve never asked. I bet you don’t even care, Toriko.”

“Hmm? That’s not true. I figured you didn’t want me being nosy. You don’t mind if I ask?”

I thought about it... And then I surprised myself. The way I’d been before now, I should have refused outright.

It wasn’t that I was shouldering some misfortune so great I’d be hesitant to talk about it, or that I had some incredible past. My family situation wouldn’t be all that interesting to hear about. I was just an unsociable university student from outside Tokyo, without anything all that special about me.

Still, I didn’t like people rooting around in my private business. I didn’t put my nose into other people’s affairs, and I wished they’d leave me alone, too. I especially hated people who weren’t actually interested in me, but tried to get close by being overly friendly.

That’s how I should have been, at least.

“How about it? I’ll ask, you know? I’ll dig into every little crack, into every nook and cranny of your life, both public and private...”

Even Toriko’s words, which I couldn’t be sure if they were a joke or not, mysteriously made me think, *If it’s her, I’d be okay with that.* With my mind made up, I opened my mouth.

“...Go ahead.”

When I answered that, Toriko stared at me, then she burst out laughing.

“You really are funny, Sorawo.”

“What?!”

“Because you looked so determined... You don’t have to push yourself. I’m sure you’ve got stuff you don’t want me getting into. Sorry, sorry.”

“Uh... Yeah.”

I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me, and I floundered around trying to recover until the mackerel sashimi

arrived. The server lit up a blowtorch, searing the mackerel sashimi right there at the table. While I was watching, Toriko spoke up.

“When’s the next time you can go?”

Next time. Next time, huh...

The words didn’t come out immediately. The flames of the blowtorch stopped, the server left, and the singed mackerel remained. I reached out with my chopsticks, still thinking how to answer.

With the Kunekune and Hasshaku-sama, we’d managed to get out of some dicey situations so far. If this kept up, though, I felt like we were going to wind up dead sooner or later. Toriko had the goal of finding her missing friend Satsuki, so she’d take whatever risks she had to. But me?

“You aren’t scared, Toriko?”

Toriko moved her beer mug away from her mouth, cocking her head to the side and giving me a blank look.

“I think we both came pretty close to dying, you know?”

“Yeah. But we didn’t die.”

“You’re not scared?”

“I *am* scared. But it’ll be fine.”

“What’s with that confidence...?”

I was exasperated with her, but Toriko shook her head.

“If I were alone, I’d have broken by now. That, or maybe I’d have died first.”

“Well, why then?”

Using the finger of the hand she was holding her mug with, Toriko pointed at me. “We’ll manage somehow. There’s two of us.”
...Was that the issue here?

2

While Toriko was in the washroom, I asked for the bill. It was a bit past 8:00 p.m. We’d started early, so we were ending early, too.

“Sorry for the wait.” Toriko came back, looking exhausted.

“Whew, I sure ate. What’d the bill come to?”

“9,504 yen.”

Toriko hadn’t fallen asleep this time, but she’d still over-ordered and been unable to finish, so I got stuck finishing her leftovers. If she’d held back some orders, it should have been a thousand yen cheaper. She hadn’t hesitated with the drinks, either.

“We racked up a nice bill, huh.”

“Don’t say that like it’s not your problem,” I grumbled back at her.

I don’t know about Toriko, but this wasn’t an amount that an impoverished student like me should have been spending on a single meal. I had some money on hand now, sure, but it had come from a

troublesome source, and I wasn't eager to waste it. Her, on the other hand...

Seeing Toriko swaying a little in her seat, I looked at her dubiously. "You okay? You're gonna be able to make it home all right by yourself?"

"*Probably... Maybe!*" Toriko insisted in English as she swayed left and right.

While I was still thinking, *Oh, really?* one of the employees came back with our change. He put the coins and the receipt down on the table. "This is kubiriyarai, so the aburagarasu will be coming."

...That's what it sounded like he said.

"Huh?" Unable to figure out what he was saying, I looked up.

"The aburagarasu is coming," he repeated, sounding annoyed. Looking closer, he was holding the blowtorch from earlier.

"Right..."

I nodded vaguely, with no clue what was going on, and the employee turned around and headed into the kitchen.

"Hey, how much should I put in?"

"4,752 yen... Just now, did you get what he just said?"

"Hmm? I wasn't listening."

What did I mishear? I cocked my head to the side in puzzlement as I stood up, heading for the exit.

The moment I opened the sliding door and went outside, I felt my vision blur. As I closed the door, out of nowhere, there was a sharp barking from the kitchen.

"Did something just go *woof?*"

Toriko turned back, too. The door to the tavern was already closed; beyond the lattice door with its frosted glass, a peal of laughter erupted. There was the sound of glass breaking, then the laughter grew even louder.

I felt kind of weird. Was I drunk? Toriko might have been, but I didn't think I had drank all that much.

It was quiet outside. There was no noise of cars. I never would have thought Shinjuku could be so quiet at this time. In the dark, the lights of the various businesses and their signs glowed faintly in the corners of my vision.

"Sorawoooo. Which way's the station?"

"It's that way. Keep it together."

And yet, it seemed as though I was fairly inebriated myself. I felt dizzy. It was probably best if I got home and went to sleep right away.

But, well... I didn't feel too badly about it, because drinking with Toriko had been a lot of fun. In the end, I felt like we hadn't talked about anything substantive, though.

"Hmm? Isn't it kinda dark?" Toriko asked.

“Maybe they’re saving electricity?”

“They don’t need to make it this dark, though.”

As I walked along, slightly tipsy, I felt more and more like something was wrong.

We weren’t reaching the station.

Weird. What was going on? This was Shinjuku.

It was Friday in the business district, yet we were the only people around. More than that, at some point the road we were on had changed from asphalt to a dirt path through waist-high grass.

“Ahh, Sorawo. You took us the wrong way, didn’t you?”

“There you go, trying to put the blame on... Wait, was Shinjuku this rustic?”

Finally, we came to a stop, looking at one another.

“...Where are we?”

That’s when it happened. There was a rumbling wind in the sky above, getting closer, and then a massive shadow fell on us.

With wings spread to the left and right, it looked like a bird. It was pitch black, so I couldn’t make out the details. When those wings, which looked about as large as a jumbo jet’s, flapped slowly, the wind created by them slammed into the ground. The grass was mowed down, and at the same time an oily smell struck my nose.

We watched in a trance as the shadow of the bird which had blotted out the night sky departed. The buildings of Shinjuku were gone now, and there wasn’t a light to be seen.

We knew this place.

It wasn’t clear how it had happened, but... We were in the other world, at night.

3

The way the wind made waves across the grassy plains made them look like the surface of some dark body of water.

It was our first time in the other world at night.

It had always been the middle of the day when we came before, and in my two expeditions with Toriko, we’d gone home before the sun set. That was because we were afraid to face the night in this unknown world.

“To-Toriko... I forget, but have you been here at night before?”

In response to my question, Toriko shook her head. “No. Satsuki said it was dangerous, so I’ve avoided it.”

Satsuki-san. The person who was responsible for dragging Toriko into exploring this other world, and also her “friend.” I’d never met her, because she’d disappeared before Toriko and I became acquainted.

From what I'd heard, it sounded like she'd been exploring this other world forever, and had quite a lot of experience with it. Now we had set foot into a situation even she had said was dangerous.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but I wasn't emotionally prepared for this, and we didn't have our equipment for exploring, either. This wasn't a situation I wanted to be in at all. I mean, let's be blunt—this was bad news, right?

"Sorawo, do you have a gun?" Toriko asked, lowering her voice.

"Of course not! Who takes a gun to go out drinking..." I trailed off mid-sentence as it occurred to me who might.

"Wait, do you?"

"I was just thinking I should've brought it."

"...Figures."

My shoulders slumped. Who knew I'd ever be disappointed to find out my friend wasn't carrying a gun?

As my eyes wandered around the area, they gradually adjusted to the starlight. At the same time, I became more aware of little noises. The other world was completely different at night. There were signs of living beings.

In daytime, you wouldn't hear so much as a bird's cry, only the sound of the wind through the grass. It felt like an artificial world. Yet now there were the sounds of birds, bugs, and other animals from all over, and I could hear the rustling of little critters running through the roots of the grass, too.

With the exception of the footpath we'd followed here, the undulating plains stretched out as far as the eye could see. There were small groves, single isolated trees, and mound-like rises silhouetted darkly against the backdrop of the night sky.

"Toriko, why do you think we entered the other world?"

"I dunno. Did we go through anywhere that strange?"

I shook my head. Nothing came to mind. Tracing my memories back, when we left the tavern, I felt like my vision had flickered for a moment. My right eye could see a silver phosphorescence that outlined objects of the other world, so maybe that was what that flickering was about.

In order to enter the other world, I had thought you needed to either find a hidden entrance, or go through some complicated procedure. The back door of an abandoned building, an elevator in which you pressed the buttons in a certain sequence, a torii gate at a shrine in the mountains that you passed through at a certain angle and time, and so on. But this time, we had just been in an ordinary tavern, drinking normally.

If I thought about it, things were strange before we left the tavern. Had that place itself been weird? Or did we do something inside it?

"We haven't done anything weird, right?"

"Yeah," I agreed with Toriko. "I think we just came out of the tavern."

"Was it a specific sequence of orders from the menu, or something?"

"We're not trying to find bugs in a game here... Ah!" I raised my voice as it suddenly hit me.

"What is it?"

"The hat!"

"...Ah." Toriko's eyes went wide, and then she awkwardly looked away.

"I told you not to put it on!"

"Th-That's not necessarily what caused it."

"I'd say it's pretty likely, wouldn't you?!"

"Well, do you want me to try putting it on again?"

"No! No! Stop. Don't touch it anymore." I hurriedly stopped Toriko as she reached for her tote bag. I must have surprised her with my tone, because Toriko raised both her hands in front of her chest in a little sign of surrender.

"I get it. I won't touch it. *Okay?*"

"...*Okay.*"

There wasn't a single thing that was okay about it, though. I covered my face as I let out a sigh.

All right, what now? How, precisely, were we going to get back?

Up until now, there had been a clearly defined exit to the other world, and we just had to go back to it to go home. This time, there was nothing like that. Even if we retraced the path we'd came, I didn't see anything like a door that would lead into that tavern.

"Which way do you want to go?" Toriko asked.

"For now... Let's not move around anymore. We could step into a glitch."

In the other world, there were what seemed to be supernatural traps, and you never knew what they'd do when you stepped into them. The man we'd met on this side, Abarato, had called them glitches.

"Maybe we should sit here until the night is over."

I looked up as I said that, and Toriko was staring over my shoulder at something.

"...I'm getting the feeling we won't be able to do that."

"Huh?"

When I turned back, following her gaze, I saw a large shadow standing outlined against the starry sky.

Is that a giraffe? I thought for a moment, because it looked like a tall, four-legged beast. But as I looked upwards, that impression went

away. The torso that was supported by those long, thin legs had no neck.

Jiii. It let out a noise that reminded me of the chirping of cicadas, and at the same time started stamping the ground. The masses hanging from its torso swayed in time with the stamping. *What're those?* I squinted and was shocked. It looked like there were several human bodies, bundled up like mummies, suspended from it by ropes.

As the cicada chirping got louder, the four-legged beast came towards us. There were dull thuds as the masses hanging beneath it hit one another. Seeing what looked like human forms hanging there like meat, I felt like I'd been splashed with cold water. Whatever tipsiness I'd been feeling was long gone.

"Sorawo... What is this?"

I grabbed the dazed Toriko by the hand. "It's something we should run away from! Let's scam!"

4

Pushing our way through the grass, we ran across the other world's night.

Having suddenly been thrown into this situation, it didn't feel real yet. My legs were all wobbly, like I was in a nightmare.

Something passed, shrieking, overhead. There was a flock of either butterflies or moths dancing through the starry sky.

"Sorawo, are we going to be fine with glitches, running like this?" Toriko shouted from behind me.

"Stay with me. Whatever you do, don't get separated!"

I looked back as I ran, and took Toriko's hand. Toriko's right hand gripped mine back tightly through its thin leather glove.

If I focused on my right eye's vision, the night of the other world was a little bit brighter. The light came from the glitches that were everywhere. In places that seemed to have nothing at first, there would be a silver halo, warning me of a supernatural threat.



I hadn't forgotten the fear from nearly walking into a Toaster last time. We'd nearly been cooked alive.

Abarato had thrown bolts ahead of him as he walked forward to search for the existence of glitches, but there was no time for that now. With footsteps chasing after us, we continued to run even as we ran out of breath.

Though there was a silver radiance, it didn't change the fact that the area was still dark. As I squinted, looking ahead of us so as not to miss any changes in the terrain or threats to us, my wide-open right eye started to hurt. Tears flowed, blurring my vision.

The ground rose up before us, like an embankment. It continued to the left and right, and there was no way around.

"Going uphill!" I warned as I ran, and headed up the slope. I tried to pull Toriko's hand as I went, but my feet came to a stop. It was steeper than I'd thought.

"It's okay, I can go alone," Toriko said, letting go of my hand.

When I turned back, uncertain, Toriko's sweaty face was looking back at me. Wordlessly nodding, Toriko started to climb the hill. We got down on all fours, like animals, and clambered up the slope.

Behind us, there were dogs barking. Halfway up the slope, I turned to look. With its awkward motions, the headless beast was getting closer. It looked like it had a relaxed gait, but the length of its legs made each stride that much longer.

There was something moving in the grass at its feet. I couldn't see it... Just the grass being parted.

The dogs barked again. Were they dogs? Really? Whatever they were, they were after us.

Then, through a gap in the grass, I saw them.

"Eep..."

I almost screamed despite myself. It was a face. I only saw it for a moment, but the two black eye sockets, and the wide open mouth were positioned in a way very similar to a human face.

"What?"

As Toriko was about to look back, I turned to face her.

"Don't stop! Hurry, go!"

Urging Toriko on, I finished climbing the slope. The moment I stood back up, I tripped on something hard. I put a hand out to catch myself, but didn't land on grass, it was gravel.

"Sorawo!"

My palm hurt. Clinging to the arm Toriko offered me as I stood up, I looked around at the top of the embankment. I was surprised. There were tracks. Rusted iron rails continued to the left and right. Wooden electrical poles at fixed intervals stood alongside the tracks,

and a drooping electrical line ran between them.

More plains spread out on the far side of the embankment, and the mysterious creature was hot on our heels. Trying to decide which way to head, I stood on my tiptoes to look around. When I was squinting at the tracks to the right, I felt like I saw something flash. Unlike the silver haze, this was a well defined light.

Instantly making a decision, I took Toriko's hand again, running along the tracks.

If there were tracks, there had to be a station somewhere. That might have been the light I'd just seen.

That was what I reflexively thought, but this was the other world, our common sense didn't apply here. I was starting to doubt whether these were even train tracks to begin with, but if I thought about it that much, I wasn't going to be able to do anything.

I heard footsteps on the gravel, and both of us turned back this time.

"Faces...!" Toriko said with a gulp.

I hadn't been mistaken before. Whatever was chasing us, they had human faces. White, egg-shaped faces, floating in the darkness, their eye sockets and mouth sunken and black. I couldn't make out their exact features, but the vague faces were actually creepier. Even more unpleasant was how low to the ground they all were. Barking like dogs, the faces rushed towards us. Behind them, I could see the giraffe-like beast climbing the embankment with unsteady steps.

Oh, crap, they were catching up. If they caught us...

...What was going to happen if they caught us?

What were these guys going to do to us?

I shuddered at the fact that I had no idea. If these were wild dogs, I could have imagined the pain of being bitten, the horror of being mauled to death, but I didn't even know what these things were.

With no place to go, the terror in my chest grew without limit, and I felt like I was going to puke. My breathing grew shallow and hurried, and I felt a tightening in my solar plexus. My eyes bulged, my mouth hung open, and the realization that I must have been making the same face as our pursuers terrified me to no end. If I screamed now, I was sure my own voice would be like nothing I'd ever heard. Forcing the air from deep inside my lungs, it would be a bestial cry, like nothing you'd expect a woman to make—

"Sorawo, move!"

Toriko's hand slapped into the middle of my back.

"Hahhh?!"

This stupidly silly voice came out of my open mouth. The scream was a dud. As I blinked, Toriko grabbed me by the shoulder, forcing me to face her. Her face occupied my entire vision. The face of a

woman, with a properly defined nose and eyes.

“Don’t give up! Let’s go!”

“Y-Yesh!”

This time, Toriko pulled my hand.

With my panic interrupted, and my thinking more or less stalled out, my feet still kept moving forward. Through the endless night, all I could see was Toriko’s back as she pulled me by the hand.

We’ll manage somehow. There’s two of us.

Her words from the after party came back to my paralyzed mind.

She might be right. If I was with Toriko, whatever was ahead of us, whatever happened—

Suddenly, Toriko stopped. It seemed she’d seen something up ahead.

“Sorawo, this way!”

“Wah?!”

I stumbled as she jerked hard on my arm. I tripped on one of the rails and fell to the left side of the tracks with Toriko.

“Stay down! Don’t raise your face!” Toriko said, pushing my head into the ground.

Before I could wonder what was up, there were gunshots from up ahead. The brilliant flash of gunfire in the darkness left an afterimage in my vision. I could hear bullets whooshing by, right over us. Behind us, there was yelping that sounded just like a dog’s, and something scampered down the embankment and into the distance.

...It got quiet.

Hesitantly, I looked up.

There was the sound of footsteps on gravel. Someone was approaching.

Not alone. There were several people.

Eventually, what came into my vision was soldiers carrying assault rifles. They wore camo uniforms and helmets, with night-vision goggles on their faces. I couldn’t tell the exact number, but there looked to be close to ten of them. The two in front had their guns trained on us, while their comrades were watching the area around us and looking down the tracks.

The moment we tried to get up, the number of guns aimed at us increased.

“*Don’t move!*” came the warning in English.

“*Don’t shoot,*” Toriko responded, also in English.

Still on the ground, I put my hands up, and hurriedly said, “*Don shoo, don shoo.*” ...In my case, my voice may have been so quiet it didn’t reach them.

With guns still pointed at us, the soldiers approached. “Are you human...?” One raised his goggles, looking at us in disbelief. He spoke

in Japanese this time.

“W-We’re human.”

“Lieutenant, something is still there!”

One of them shouted a warning, and the soldiers took aim with their guns again. This time, down the tracks. When I turned to look, that four-legged beast stood there, straddling the tracks. The corpses dangling below it were swaying. From the side, it would have looked like a gallows was walking this way on four legs.

Behind it, another humanoid form appeared. Tall, muscular, and naked. From the neck up, it was a bushy mass of vegetation, and deer-like antlers grew out the sides of its head. The antlers branched in a fine fractal-like pattern, spreading out like coral.

The man with antlers seemed to be staring in our direction, but eventually he turned to look away, descending from the embankment as if he’d lost interest. The four-legged beast backed away making cicada noises.

We waited with bated breath for it to disappear, and finally the soldiers lowered their guns.

The man they’d called “Lieutenant” extended a hand to us.

“Are you all right?”

“Th... Thank you.”

The soldiers approached as he helped us up. Their gazes were full of killing intent, and I could tell they were clearly wary of us.

Are we sure they’re human?

Aren’t they monsters, too?

They were speaking in English, but even I could make out that much.

One of the soldiers came forward, speaking impatiently.

Lieutenant, you shouldn’t get close. I’m sure they’re xxxs, too. Let’s shoot them.

I couldn’t pick it all up because he spoke so fast, but I knew that was what he’d said in his rapid English. He turned his gun on us again. He held the rifle so tightly his knuckles were white. The other soldiers watched anxiously to see how things would develop, making no attempt to intervene. Just when we thought we’d been saved, were we going to be shot by suspicious humans? While I went stiff, Toriko stepped up to protect me.

Instinctively, I grabbed her by the hand and stopped her. When Toriko turned back to me, I glared at her. *I don’t need you protecting me. If we’re going to get shot, we’re both finished.*

While Toriko and I were glaring at each other, surrounded by a group of tough soldiers, the “lieutenant” intervened.

“Stop, Greg. You must have seen it—these girls were being chased by the Horned Man. They’re human.”

“But Lieutenant!”

“Sergeant Major! Lower your gun... that’s an order.”

The sergeant major he called Greg glared at us as he slowly lowered his gun, and the lieutenant turned back to us. “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

“Sh-Shinjuku... In Tokyo.”

Tokyo? Did she say Tokyo? There was surprised chatter from the soldiers. *That’s hundreds of miles away!*

“Where’d you come in from?” Toriko asked, and the lieutenant answered.

“Okinawa.”

“Okinawa?!”

Hearing an unexpected name, it was our turn to be caught by surprise. We’d already known there was a dislocation between distances in this world and distances in our own, though.

“Then you’re... U.S. forces in Japan?”

The lieutenant nodded in response to Toriko. “We’re with the Marines. I’m Lieutenant Will Drake. Palehorse Battalion, 3rd Company, second in command,” the lieutenant said in a soft tone.

5

“...So you don’t know a way out, either?”

“R-Right. We aren’t sure what triggered us coming to this world...” My response made Lieutenant Drake shake his head.

“That’s a shame. I thought we might finally be able to escape from this hell.”

We were walking down the tracks, surrounded by the Marines; I could feel Sergeant Major Greg’s hostility behind me, and couldn’t relax. Though he’d lowered his gun—for now—he hadn’t relaxed his guard against us in the slightest.

But it wasn’t just him. I couldn’t say the looks the other Marines were giving us were friendly, either. I thought it would be good to communicate with and try to put them at ease, but I was bound to put my foot in my mouth after I made things worse, so I decided not to.

Stroking the stubble on his face with a gloved hand, the lieutenant continued. “I’m sorry to say this, but we may not be able to help you girls back to the world you came from. We’ve been on the Otherside for over a month now, but we still haven’t found a way to escape.”

The “Otherside,” in English, was their name for the other world. With his helmet removed, the lieutenant’s curly locks and melancholy eyes gave him a distinctive impression. He seemed like a quiet person. He might have just been tired, though; the bags under his eyes spoke to just how spent he was.

“How did all of you end up in this world...?” I asked.

“We were training in the mountains, when somehow our whole unit ended up here. By the time we realized the vegetation was different from what you’ll find in Okinawa, it was too late. We gathered our scattered company together and deployed with the station building as our base, but we’ve taken a few casualties, at the very least.” There was a slight frustration in his voice.

Toriko turned back in the direction we’d come. “Casualties? Did the monsters from before get them?” she asked.

“That was only a small portion of them. Did you see? The bodies hanging from its belly.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Those were our comrades. The mule, too.”

“Mule? You mean the headless giraffe thing?”

“He was originally a cargo-carrier robot attached to our unit. While he was carrying their remains, he got caught in a strange bear trap and stopped moving, so we had no choice but to leave him. Then, he showed up in that form later and started to attack people.”

He told the story so plainly, the bizarreness of its content didn’t hit me for a little while. Basically, that four-legged beast was, in fact, a transformed machine! When I thought about how that cicada-like chirping was the whir of the engine, it made sense, but still... What a shock. Up until that point, I’d had it in my head that only living creatures could be influenced by the other world. The “bear trap” he’d referred to might have been a glitch... I couldn’t imagine what underlying process could have warped a machine like that.

While I was at a loss for words, Toriko kept talking to the lieutenant. “So, you mentioned a station building?”

“Yes. Station February. It’s a small, old station.”

“Why is it ‘February’?”

“That’s what was written there.”

Following the tracks as they curved to the right, a station hidden in a grove of trees came into view. There were small lights illuminating the single-line platform. Having found light in the darkness at last, I felt myself noticeably relax.

Climbing the stairs onto the platform, we stood on the cracked concrete. There was a white bench with peeling paint and a wooden station building that looked like an impromptu shack, only illuminated by yellow-tinged light bulbs.

“You have electricity running here?”

“I don’t know. They’ve been lit since we got here, but there’s no sign of power lines.”

The train tracks continued past the station. When I squinted down in that direction, I felt like I was going to be swallowed into the

darkness.

“Are there other abandoned stations?” I asked.

“None that we’ve found yet. And... it seems this one isn’t abandoned, either.”

“Huh? What do you...?”

Turning in response to the lieutenant’s implicative words, the station name sign jumped into view.

Thanks to that, I finally learned what kind of place this was. Station February—Kisaragi Station.

6

Kisaragi Station is a famous bit of internet lore; I knew the exact time that the incident which came to be known under this name had occurred. It was January 8th, 2004 at 11:00 p.m. I can say that because the incident was posted in real time on 2channel, the anonymous message board.

It all began with a post saying, *There’s something wrong with the train I’m on*. The train didn’t stop at the station it was supposed to, and when it finally did stop, it was at a deserted station the poster had never seen before. The sign there read “Kisaragi Station,” but that line wasn’t supposed to have a station by that name...

The person experiencing the event used their cellphone to call their family and post online as they tried to get home, but as they were being taken somewhere in a suspicious individual’s car, their phone’s power died, and all contact was lost. I was only a child in 2004, so I found out about this much later, but after this story was written, there was a massive increase in the number of these “wandered into another world” accounts. It may have been the first of this kind of internet lore.

To be honest, I was feeling more than a little emotional. It was like I was making a pilgrimage to a holy site... This was on a whole different level from meeting the Kunekune or Hasshaku-sama. Sure, they had closely resembled creatures spoken of in lore, but it wasn’t like they’d introduced themselves with those names. This was different—here, it actually said “Kisaragi.” This station shouldn’t have existed, but it really did! Can you blame me for feeling a rush of emotion at that?

Still, encountering it like this, it was more than I’d ever expected to find. The station that wasn’t supposed to exist had become camp for a group of USFJ Marines.

Walking through the unmanned ticket gates, past a waiting room with a few light blue benches, and then out of the small station building, there was a camp full of soldiers. When we were passing

between olive green tents, a sentry greeted the lieutenant with a salute, but his eyes bugged out as he saw us.

The smell of gasoline hung in the air. I heard the groan of a generator, so they likely had electricity, but the camp was still dark, and it looked like they were keeping light to a minimum.

Those bulky silhouettes I saw beyond the row of tents, those were armored cars, huh? Past them, there was a wall made of sandbags, and on it they had set up a ridiculously large machine gun.

"Why are there no guards on the platform?" Toriko asked, looking back towards the ticket gate.

"Because it's dangerous. When a train comes."

When a train comes...?

Toriko and I looked at one another.

The lieutenant came to a stop in front of one tent. He turned to Greg, who was following behind us. "Sergeant Major, this is far enough. Let the men rest."

"It's dangerous, Lieutenant. I can't trust them," Greg said so that we could hear him. The lieutenant sighed and shook his head.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Sergeant Major."

"...Understood. Be careful, sir."

"I know. Good work out there."

Sergeant Major Greg saluted. Then he pointed to his eyes with two fingers before turning them to point at us before he left. I guess that meant, *I'm watching you*.

"Forgive my subordinates' rudeness. They're reaching their limits—it pains me to have to ask this of you, but try not to do anything to provoke them," the lieutenant said in a weary voice, then called inside the tent. "Major, I'm back."

"Come in."

The lieutenant entered the tent, and we followed behind him.

The man who was sitting at the table writing something looked up. He was a sharp-eyed man, and his dull blond hair was neatly combed back. He stood bolt upright when he saw us. He was solidly built, and tall, too, and his head nearly brushed the top of the tent.

"Lieutenant. Who are these girls?"

"Civilians we encountered on return from our topographical survey, sir. They claim that, about an hour ago, they came to the Otherside from Tokyo."

"Their entry point?"

"Unclear. By the time they noticed, they were already here."

"Do you have a rough location?"

"I could make an estimate, but it's likely in the territory of the wild things. The Horned Man, Face Dogs, and the Walking Gallows were chasing them."

The major nodded. "Send a scouting team out when the sun's up. You choose the members."

"Got it. The place is full of bear traps, though."

The major looked at us. With his light-colored eyes fixed on me, I suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"How did you two make it through a place so full of bear traps?"

I struggled to find the words. The answer, of course, was because I could see what they were calling "bear traps." But was it all right to tell them that? From the way Greg reacted before, it seemed reckless to speak too candidly. While I was still unable to find a safe answer to get us through this, the lieutenant spoke up unexpectedly. "The girls were following the tracks. We haven't found any bear traps on the tracks so far. Before that..."

The lieutenant paused, looking at us questioningly. Toriko answered before I could. "We were lucky."

The major furrowed his brow. "I think being here is bad enough luck in and of itself. Welcome, though. I'm Ray Barker, the current commander of this unit."

Toriko and I gave our names, adding that we were just university students.

"University students from Tokyo, huh. It's becoming harder and harder to cling to the interpretation that we're lost, wandering the mountains of Okinawa."

If we wanted to be precise, the university I went to was in Saitama, not Tokyo, but I wasn't going to go out of my way to correct him.

"By current, you mean...?"

"We've lost a lot of men along the way here. No small number of them went mad, or disappeared. The ones who had the worst of it were those whose bodies or psyche were influenced by a bear trap. Most were finished off by their own comrades, but some produced more casualties as they ran off into the wilderness."

The major turned a weary look towards us.

"Are you girls all right? There's nothing wrong with your bodies? Before they noticed it, their bodies and hearts had been warped in strange ways. If something feels off, I'd prefer you say so now."

Toriko and I shook our heads in unison.

"Nope."

"N-No, sir."

The major looked closely at us, then nodded. "I see. If any of the women in our unit were still alive, I'd want you to undergo an examination, but it seems I'll have to take you at your word."

"That's very... gentlemanly of you." Suspicion crept into my voice. Something must have amused him, because wrinkles formed at the

corners of the major's eyes.

"If we don't make the attempt to remain civilized, it would be all too easy for us to become animals out here. If that ever happened, all hope of escape would be lost."

"We never know when we'll follow our brothers into the wilderness. Even if we don't, if we can't escape from here, our reserves will run out and we'll starve, or the wild things will break through our defenses and kill us. It'd be good if we could use the route you girls took," the lieutenant added.

"I saw you have armored cars. Can't you use those?" Toriko asked.

"It's true, we have a number of MRAPs, but not enough of the diesel they use as fuel. We had to prioritize the generator. Even if we did have enough diesel, though, now that we know the bear traps can transform vehicles, we can't use them carelessly," the major replied.

"So, basically, we're trapped in the middle of an invisible mine field, and we can't move out of this station as a result," the lieutenant summed up the situation in a self-mocking tone. The emotion in his sunken eyes was tinged with more exhaustion than hope. It made me think he might have already given up on escaping.

"There are no bear traps on the tracks, right? Why don't you all move down the line in search of an exit?"

"We tried that, of course. I sent a whole platoon in each direction, but only one man returned. He walked like he was going for a pleasant stroll, humming as he went and diligently carving up his face with his own Ka-Bar knife."

His plain telling of that horrible scene made me wince. The major smiled a little.

"Let us provide you with an empty tent. I guarantee, no one will come near you. You can relax. When morning comes, I would appreciate it if you would join the team that goes in search of your entry point."

"O-Okay."

"Got it."

"Oh, and one more thing..." the major said as the lieutenant was showing us out. "I would advise you not to use your phones."

7

"...Looks like I can use my phone."

"You've got bars, yeah."

I looked at my phone in disbelief.

The tent we were led to was a messy space with a simple bed, a table, and folding chairs. Trash from rations and crushed water bottles were scattered around, making the tent look more like a ruin. What

had happened to the people who once slept here?

We sat side-by-side on the simple bed, looking at our phones. Toriko was looking at my phone, even though she could have just tested her own.

“Just one bar... Oh, now it’s three. It’s not stable, but it looks like we can get through.”

“Hey, want to try making a call?”

“To where? And who?”

“Kozakura.”

“Kozakura-san, huh...”

Kozakura was apparently a researcher of this world, so it was true she might be able to help. The thing was, I had only met her once, so I had no sense for what she was like. I wasn’t big on the idea.

“I don’t know her number. You call, Toriko.”

“The thing is, my display’s all weird.”

When Toriko showed me her screen, I was surprised. The display was completely corrupted, and even the icon images were a mess.

The first time I met Toriko, my smartphone got messed up after it took a dip in the water here in the other world. Toriko’s screen looked like it had done just that, as the text was unreadable. Did a font like that even exist?

“You remember her number?”

“Yeah. It’s 090—”

After punching in the numbers as she said them, for lack of any better option, I heard a dialing sound mixed with static.

“Sounds like it’s going through.”

“Put it on speaker phone!”

The dialing sound echoed through the tent.

“Is this okay...? The major just told us not to use our phones.”

“He was just acting. You know, acting.”

“This isn’t that kind of easygoing situation! He’ll get mad at us for this.”

“Neither of us is one of his subordinates, so we should just do what we want. He didn’t forbid it anyway... He just said, ‘I would advise you not to.’”

“Well, sure, but...”

There was a loud burst of static, cutting me off.

“...Yes?”

“Uh, h-hello! Kozakura-san, is that you?”

“*Who is this?*”

The curt reply flustered me.

“I-I’m, uh, Kamikoshi, we met before. D-Do you remem—”

“*Oh... Sorawo-chan?*”

“Y-Yes!”

I was relieved she hadn't forgotten me.

When we met face-to-face, I was misled by her appearance as a small, thin girl who looked like she belonged in middle school, so it hadn't occurred to me at the time, but over the phone I realized Kozakura had a surprisingly deep voice. Was she still sitting in that poorly lit study, surrounded by the glow of her multi-monitor setup now?

"*What is it? Did something happen to the other idiot?*" Kozakura asked irritably.

"I'm right here," Toriko interjected.

"*Okay, then. What do you want? Hold on, where are you calling from? What is this noise? It's annoying.*"

"Sorry, I think the signal's bad."

"*Tell whoever's behind you to pipe down!*"

"Huh?"

I turned around despite myself; we were the only ones in the deserted tent. While I was confused, Kozakura pressed me.

"*And?*"

"Um, err..."

"Kozakura, we're calling from the Otherside."

"*Huh?*"

That must have shocked her.

"*You get a signal there? That's ridiculous.*"

"I-I know, right? But it's true," I said.

"So, listen, we wandered from the streets of Shinjuku into the other side. And get this, there's a military force here! The USFJ!"

"*Huh?*"

"Toriko, that doesn't tell her anything! Uh, this is Kisaragi Station. Do you know it? Oh! Of course you would know, sorry, excuse me—"

"*Listen, you pair of nitwits... Talk so I can understand.*"

With noise occasionally cutting into the connection, Toriko and I explained the situation. When we finished going through everything, Kozakura suspiciously asked, "*Palehorse Battalion? That's who you said they were?*"

"Y-Yes."

"*Not Darkhorse?*"

"That's not what they said."

"So, is that a problem?"

"*If it were Darkhorse, I'd understand. They're a unit that tests next generation equipment. I wouldn't be surprised to find them with a robot, and it seems they're actually deployed to Okinawa. But—at least as far as publicly available information goes—I'm not seeing the name Palehorse.*"

"Which means...?"

"*They're likely a secret unit,*" Kozakura said, lowering her voice.

“But they came right out and called themselves that?”

“You may have been lied to. That, or they thought there was no risk you’d be leaking their secret.”

“Huh? Are they going to erase us?”

“No way. There’s a number of peaceful ways to shut someone up... or so I’d like to say, but from what you’ve told me, their nerves are badly frayed. If they find out about the changes in your bodies, they may be quick to pull the trigger. If you stay there—”

“What should we do? If we’re going to run, where do we run to...?”

“...away. Stay there.” Kozakura’s voice got lower.

“Um, what did you just say...”

“Won’t let you get away,” Kozakura said on the other side of the phone.

My back broke out in goosebumps. I dropped my phone as I reflexively stood up. The little screen shone brightly on the canvas of the simple bed.

“...please. It’s dangerous. Next stop, Kisaragi.”

“Kozakura...?” Toriko asked in a whisper, putting a hand on my arm. We looked down at the screen together, getting closer to one another without realizing it.

“The train will be arriving soon. Please, remain standing behind the white line. Hurry up.”

The words coming out of the speaker were making less and less sense.

“The platform is the blue light of death, looking at videos of dolphins, do it. We will soon pass the threshold. It’s the kind of monkey train common at kindergartens. An old man with a wire will be coming.”

Suddenly, there was a high-pitched metallic sound, making us jump.

Clang, clang... There was a sound like a bell ringing, and it went on for a while.

Next, there was a rumbling as the ground shook. When it seemed like that had stopped, the camp suddenly went into a frenzy. The sound of heavy boots running around, and rough English barked back and forth. The generator groaned, and there was a clattering sound.

By the time I noticed it, the screen on my phone had gone dark. Hesitantly, I picked it up. The call had cut out. Had the conversation just now really happened?

“Sorawo...” When I looked up, Toriko was standing there, looking bewildered. “Wh-What do you think happened to Kozakura?”

She seemed more shaken up than usual. After a moment’s hesitation, I realized why... Of course she would be. She’d known Kozakura longer than me. If someone like that started spouting

nonsense all of a sudden, of course she would get worried.

“Toriko, let’s just think about us for now, okay?”

When I said that, Toriko bit her lip and looked down.

“Yeah, but Kozakura, she...”

Ohh, I get it—She’s such a good girl.

I felt like I was gradually coming to understand Toriko. She really cared about her friends. It wasn’t just Satsuki-san. For Toriko, Kozakura was an important friend, too.

Toriko... she wasn’t heartless like me.

I chose my next words carefully. “Toriko. You’re worried about Kozakura, right? If we’re going to check on her, we’ll need to get out of here first. We’ll make it back to our original world together. Okay?”

“...Okay. Got it.” Toriko nodded. “Thanks, Sorawo.”

“S-Sure.”

Then, I heard footsteps outside the tent, and the door was pulled open. It was Lieutenant Drake. His eyes went to my smartphone, then back to our faces. He shook his head in resignation. “This is why he told you you shouldn’t use your phone.”

“Huh...?”

Before I could ask anything, the lieutenant continued. “Don’t leave the tent, please. There’s a battle starting. You’ll be safe here... probably, at least.”

That was all he said, and then he left. While we listened to his fading footsteps, we looked at the light leaking in through the entrance.

“...What now, Toriko?”

“Let’s go. We can’t stay put here.”

“I didn’t even have to ask, huh.”

Pulling back the heavy tent flap, we stepped outside.

8

In a total change from mere moments before, the camp was now bright as can be. There were powerful lights—like those used during construction at night—lighting the area, making it as bright as if it were daytime. The sound of the generator running had gotten loud enough to be grating, however, and our plan to hide out in the shadows as we went had fallen apart the moment we set foot outside the tent.

That being said, absolutely no one was paying attention to us. The Marines were gathered around the perimeter of the camp, looking out from behind the sandbags. They were all equipped with heavy guns; even the big machine gun, which had just been a silhouette before, now had someone manning it. I saw a number of diagonal tubes with

two legs for support... What were those?

"Toriko, what's that?"

"A mortar," she replied.

"And the big machine gun?"

"An M2, or something like that, I think."

"Why do you know so much about this stuff?"

"This doesn't come close to knowing a lot! I just learned from my parents... And hold on. YOU asked ME, so you're being kind of rude!"

Hmm? There's some new information.

Toriko said nothing more as she continued to press forward. We found an unmanned jeep, and we climbed up on top of it together. We crawled from the bonnet up onto the roof. From the higher vantage point, we could look out over the top of the sandbags.

Outside the camp was total darkness. If I squinted, I could make out the dark shadow of mountains on the line dividing the night sky from the grassy plains. In the endless night, this camp was a small island of light. From an amateur's perspective, it felt like being in the only well-lit area would be a disadvantage, but... setting aside the issue of human-on-human battles, maybe bright areas were safer in this world.

There were a lot of people, but no one spoke. Mixed in with the echoing drone of the generator, I suddenly noticed sounds that were out of place.

"Music...?" Toriko whispered.

That was what it sounded like to me, too. Old court music? No, this was closer to festival music. There were gongs, drums, and an out of tune flute. Clanging, thumping, tooting... As I listened, I became less and less confident it was music. There was no melody, and the tempo was unstable. It was almost all dissonance. As the ominous festival music drew closer, a line of yellowish lights came into view. It was hard to judge distance, but it was snaking its way down the mountain. It looked similar to a procession of people carrying candles down a mountain road, but something felt off.

It was strangely fast. That wasn't human speed.

Someone shouted an order. I could see the soldiers on the mortars loading shells into the tube. *Shoop!* There was a sound like a louder version of the one made when you opened a tube with a certificate in it, and smoke rose from the mortar. I don't know how many seconds later, but soon, a bright red flame exploded in the darkness, followed by a delayed boom that shook my eardrums. They were small tubes, so I'd let my guard down, but the sound was surprisingly loud.

The shell had come down a fair distance ahead of the line of yellow lights. The lights played their warped music as they continuing forward without slowing. More orders came from the camp, and this

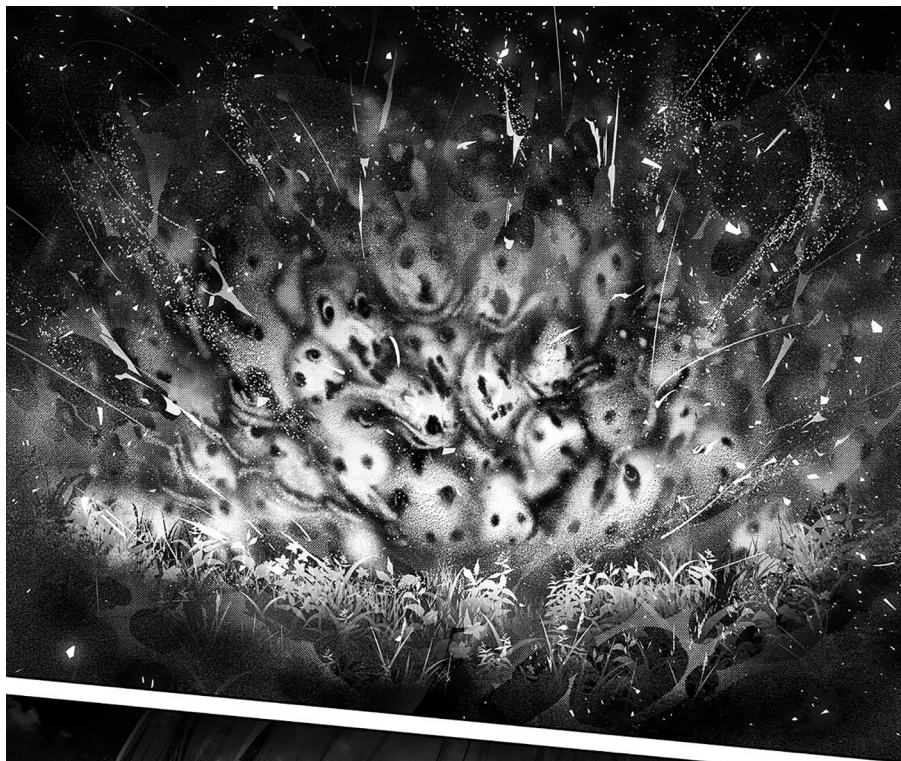
time three mortars fired in sequence.

They may have been controlling their distance, because the points of impact for each were spread out forward and backward. One of them hit right next to the line of lights. The procession seemed to waver for a moment, but it quickly recovered and resumed its advance.

Next, the M2 opened fire on them. The metallic sound of the gunfire made me involuntarily cover my ears. The barrel spat orange fire, and a dotted red line stretched out, bouncing at the point of impact. In the middle of a cloud of dust illuminated by tracer rounds, the festival procession charged onward. That's when I got my first detailed glimpse at the line.

Faces. Again with the human faces. Those sunken eye sockets, those gaping, hollow, black mouths. Vaguely defined white faces which closely resembled the ones that had chased us before were stretched out in a vertical column, coming this way.

It was like an old black and white photograph of an assembly had become a single, large creature. I wasn't sure how to describe it. All of the faces were expressionless, and their outlines blurred. I couldn't even guess at what they were thinking. Even as it writhed and undulated under the continuous M2 fire, the horde of faces tenaciously closed in towards the camp.



The soldiers screamed and fired their guns. Shouts, screams, and prayers came together in one horrible cacophony.

Though their firing line was focused, with no breaks in it, it was unclear how much of an effect it was actually having. The procession of faces undulated like a great serpent, cutting across about ten meters ahead of the camp. It was like it was showing them its myriad faces...

Then it suddenly occurred to me. Perhaps its goal wasn't to attack the soldiers directly—it might have been aiming to terrify them with its faces and make them lose their sanity. I remembered feeling like I was going to go insane when we were being chased by beasts with human faces. What if the more you looked at that thing, the closer it brought you to madness?

I was sure I hadn't yet seen the true nature of the thing yet. I focused my consciousness into my right eye. My head throbbed. Was it because I'd overused it getting past the glitches? I shut my eye tight, and when it opened, I felt as if my field of vision had suddenly become clearer, and so I focused on the horde of faces once more.

Those aren't faces at all, I realized. It was a pattern. What had looked like eyes and mouths was just black spots on a white background.

It was the simulacra phenomenon.

The human brain is programmed to recognize human faces. It's important to be able to detect other people's faces, so when we see three dots, we recognize them as a face. Most alleged spirit photos, the kind where a face is visible in the leaves or shadows, can be chalked up to this effect. It's like a bug in the brain, an illusion that's unavoidable by design.

The things that looked like faces... weren't. There was no need to fear them as such, which was good. But what exactly was this thing that used black spots to invoke terror in humans? When I looked up, I thought I was going to go mad for an entirely different reason.

"To-Toriko."

"What's wrong, Sorawo?"

"A cow..."

"A cow?"

The creature, taken as a whole, looked more like a caterpillar than a snake. It was a bumpy mass that looked like an agglomeration of human faces, and it had countless stubby legs growing out of it. At the very top of its body, right in the middle, there was what looked like a ridiculously large cow head growing out of it. It was a pitch black bull with curved horns. Between the horns floated what looked like a circle formed by twisting straw rope, and blue light radiated out from inside the ring.

With me here, recognizing its true form, would the Marines' bullets actually hit it? Thinking they might, I watched the situation, but the soldiers were all being misled by the faces. Their bullets wouldn't reach the layer of reality I was seeing.

"...Toriko, could I get you to shoot again?"

"Sure thing. Give me a sec."

Toriko looked around the area quickly before jumping down from the vehicle. I don't know if it was in preparation for being attacked, or if they just hadn't been strictly managing them to begin with, but there were firearms left lying here and there around the camp. Without drawing attention, Toriko borrowed a gun and came back. It was a rifle with a rattling, noisy shape and a large scope attached.

"Sorry for the wait."

"What's that thing? I've never seen one before."

"Erm, it's an M14... EBR, or something like that."

"Hmm."

"Hey, if you're not gonna understand what I tell you, you don't have to ask, you know?"

She had a point, but it was kind of interesting seeing Toriko come up with information I didn't know myself.

"So? Where do I shoot?"

"Above the mass of faces. Three meters or so."

"Gotcha."

Toriko sat down on the roof of the jeep, resting her elbows on her raised knees as she assumed a firing posture. A moment later, she chuckled.

"What is it?"

"I went and looked through the scope even though I'm trying to shoot something invisible."

"There was a song like that, wasn't there? Well, just give it a shot."

"Aye-aye. I'll shoot at random, then."

I could only stay sane in this situation thanks to Toriko. If I were alone, by now... No, maybe the truth was, even with two of us, we had long since gone nuts. No matter how I looked at it, this was no time to be cracking jokes.

Toriko fired.

"A little lower."

Toriko lowered the barrel, firing again.

"Well? Am I hitting it?"

"...Look like this isn't going to work."

The bullets definitely looked like they were passing through the area where the bull's head was, but they were slipping by it. Why?

Last time, I'd had Toriko aim at Hakushaku-sama's head. This

time, as far as Toriko was concerned, the target I had designated was an empty space. That might be the difference. Did that mean perception could influence whether it was a hit or miss?

In that case, there was only one way left.

“Toriko, give me the gun. I’ll take a shot at it.”

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

There was shouting from the soldiers. Looking, I saw a face I remembered. It was Sergeant Major Greg. He had noticed the gunfire from behind them, but I didn’t have time to be concerned. Ignoring the calls to, *Get down from there immediately*, I imitated Toriko and sat on the roof.

“You know how to shoot?”

“Help me,” I responded as I took the heavy rifle from her. Toriko nodded and moved around behind me. Toriko fixed my form—which was an imitation of hers—from behind me. When I looked through the scope, my right eye captured the bull’s head.

“Support me.”

When I felt Toriko’s hands on my shoulders, I pulled the trigger.

The stock kicked into my shoulder. I felt like it was going to bowl me over, but Toriko braced me. The scope jerked away from my field of vision, but I didn’t need to look anymore. Suddenly, like some sort of siren, the loud wail of a bull echoed through the area.

Right after I saw the bull’s head slump in my right eye, my left eye witnessed a massive number of people melting and screaming. In front of the Marines’ eyes, a blue light that appeared, as if from nothing, flashed brilliantly, and then shattered like glass.

In the field where the guns had fallen silent, the once unending sound of gongs, drums, and flutes disappeared as if it were being sucked away.

“What happened...?!” With a bewildered look on his face, Lieutenant Drake pushed through his men to approach us. Sergeant Major Greg shook his head repeatedly in disbelief.

“Shit, what was that? Did you two do that? Seriously?” He stared in the direction where the monster had stood moments ago, cursing. It seemed he couldn’t suppress his excitement.

“How did you do that, huh? Dammit, did I have the wrong idea about you two? If so, I’m sorry...” There were tears on his cheeks when he turned towards us. Sergeant Major Greg gazed up at me with a childlike smile.

His face froze.

“You—that eye—what happened?”

Toriko took a look at my face, and her voice raised in panic.

“Sorawo, your right eye! It fell out!”

Shocked, I brought my hand to my face. Then, I finally realized:

my right eye hadn't fallen out of its socket. The color contact had come loose. He'd seen my discolored blue pupil.

"Are you with the monsters after all?" Sergeant Major Greg asked slowly, his expression of joy having slowly vanished.

"Sorawo, we're running!"

Toriko slid her butt from the roof down onto the bonnet, picking up momentum as she dropped to the ground. I hurried after her. Leaving the rifle behind, we made a mad dash out of there.

"Wait! It's dangerous that way!" The lieutenant shouted a warning from behind us.

"Don't go—*the train will be coming soon!*"

Without having time to understand what he was saying, we dashed across the camp back towards Kisaragi Station. We raced through the unmanned ticket gate, and as soon as we got onto the platform, I heard that bell again.

Dong... Dong... Dong... Dong...

"...It's a railway crossing," Toriko said as if suddenly having a flash of insight. It wasn't a bell. This was the sound of the warning buzzer at a railway crossing.

I saw light on the tracks to our left, in the direction of "Yami." The headlights of the train which passed through a station that shouldn't exist, one even battle-hardened Marines wouldn't approach, were gradually getting larger.

When I turned back and looked past the ticket gate, I could see that a group of Marines led by Sergeant Major Greg were chasing after us. Would we have to run across the tracks to escape now? When I focused on my right eye, looking for glitches, I realized the approaching train had a silver halo. In that haze, the train appeared as a double image. One, a rusty old train. The other, a newer, more familiar kind.

"That's it! Toriko, Toriko, our way out's here."

"You mean the train?"

Toriko leaned out from the platform.

"The surface world and other world overlap there. If we ride it, probably, we can get back."

Looking at the approaching train, Toriko's eyes narrowed in doubt.

"But doesn't it look like it's going to pass by this station?"

True, the train showed no sign of slowing.

"Do you want to wait for the next one?" I asked.

When Toriko turned to look at me, I firmly shook my head.

"I kid. We have to ride it, Toriko."

"How?"

"...Give me your hand."

Having sensed something in the way I spoke, Toriko frowned.
“You want to make me touch something weird again, don’t you?”

“I can’t deny it.”

“I thought so!”

Despite her upset tone, Toriko took her gloves off. The translucent fingers of her left hand were exposed. The light of the approaching headlights was twisted through her fingers, releasing mysterious sparkles.

“What do I do?”

“When I say now, grab what you’re touching, and pull on it as hard as you can. Like you’re trying to tear it apart.”

That silver haze was likely an interface where the two worlds made contact. If I could see it, then surely Toriko could touch it.

“I dunno... Is this dangerous?”

“It’s super dangerous, and the timing’s going to be tight, too.”

“I’m not so sure anymore.”

I held hands with Toriko, my left hand in Toriko’s right. Her palm, with the glove now taken off, was sweaty. The train was almost here. Acting like it was no big deal, I smiled at her. “We’ll manage somehow. There’s two of us.”

Toriko blinked in surprise, shutting her mouth. “Hey, that’s my—”

“Here we go!”

“Whaaaa?!”

Pulling Toriko by the hand, I jumped, thrusting us towards the oncoming train. In the headlights, our silhouettes stretched down the tracks. With the rumble of its wheels on the rails, the train was getting closer to us.

This is scary—really scary! I could see Toriko floating in midair out of the corner of my eye, her eyes shut tight. I wished I could shut mine, too, but that wasn’t an option. I needed to watch until the very last moment. If I closed my eyes, we’d both be run over and die. I shouted.

“Now!”

I grabbed Toriko’s left hand, swinging with all my might. I saw the curtain between the two worlds torn open. As we were sucked into the rift we had forced open, the train continued past Kisaragi Station.

“Guh!” I groaned at the shock of being thrown to the floor. I lay on my side, hyperventilating. Looking beside me, Toriko was nervously about to open her eyes.

“...We’re alive.”

Though I was still a bit out of it, I slowly got up. The moment I did, I witnessed a scene that made every hair on my body stand on end, and I instantly covered Toriko’s eyes.

“Whoa! Hold on, what are you—”

“N-No, you can’t look yet,” I told her in a quivering voice.

There were still two overlapping scenes in the car. One of them was the problem. In an old passenger car, I’m not sure from what era, there were a number of passengers sitting in silence. I saw some were in Marine uniforms, too. On the far end, a group of ape-like creatures covered in dark, black fur were using pliers, knives, and electrical tools to brutally kill the passengers.

There were a number of victims already, and the walls and floor glistened with blood and entrails. Once they had dismembered one person, the apes would mercilessly go to work on their next victim. They must have known danger was approaching, but for some reason the passengers didn’t move, or say so much as a word.

The scene itself was horrifyingly ominous, and I nearly screamed just looking at it. It was like fingernails digging directly into the region of the brain that governs fear. I hadn’t thought much before I covered Toriko’s eyes, but I was glad I’d done so. I was the only one who had to see these awful things—Toriko couldn’t look at this.

Ohh, I see, this must have been what the Marines were afraid of—the horrifying scene inside the train that passed through the station. They were afraid this train would stop there and open its doors.

The blood-covered apes looked our way and bared their teeth. The scene inside the car gradually grew faint. Had we finally gotten out of the other world...? No, that wasn’t it.

I was losing consciousness.

9

When I came to, I was inside a noisy train, crouching down. There was a warm, soft feeling against my back.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Sorawo. We’re already back,” Toriko said close to my ear. “I’m here. It’s okay. We’re together.”

I slowly looked up. Gradually, I figured out the situation. I was cowered as I clutched the metal bar next to the car door, and Toriko was hugging me from behind.

Hesitantly, I turned around. Toriko’s face was right there. Not seeming to notice her loose hair hanging over her pretty face, she looked back at me with a relieved smile.

“Where is this...?”

When I looked past Toriko, I saw the exhausted-looking passengers had furrowed their brows in irritation, keeping their distance from us.

We made it back.

As that sunk in, the tension in my body slipped away. If I hadn’t been clutching the pole for support, I’d have landed on my rear end.

Toriko was supporting me, so I somehow managed to avoid falling over.

“Sorawo... Thank goodness.”

Toriko touched my face, using her right hand with the glove off. When she wiped below my eye, I realized for the first time that my cheeks were wet.

“The next stop is Shakujii-kouen Station. The doors on the right will open,” the speakers on the train announced.

It was the station closest to Kozakura’s house.

“Can you stand?” Toriko asked, and I nodded.

“I’m fine... I can walk by myself.”

Now that we had at least made it back from the other world, the next matter of concern was Kozakura. As I remembered that creepy conversation we’d had over the phone, strength returned to my still shaky legs.

We got off the train and walked to Kozakura’s mansion from there. Opening the door and letting ourselves in, Toriko rushed deeper inside. Too impatient to take my shoes off first, I followed her.

Once she’d opened the door to Kozakura’s room with force, we stopped and stood there at the entrance.

“...What?”

Surrounded by a large quantity of books and trash, Kozakura looked back at us irritably from where she sat facing her desk. The cold light of her multi-display setup, the mug full of hot cola sitting on a coaster. Nothing much had changed since the last time I’d met her.

“A-Are you all right?”

“How so?”

“You were saying some strange things.”

“Huh?”

Toriko questioned her in bewilderment, while Kozakura glared at her suspiciously.

“What are you talking about? Are *you* okay? Have you been doing drugs?”

Unable to bear any more of this, I interjected. “Um, we just spoke on the phone, right?”

“The phone—that was you? Playing strange pranks.”

“Pranks?”

“Hey, don’t tell me you don’t remember? I hope you haven’t been doing strange stuff, too, now, Sorawo-chan.”

When Kozakura picked up her smartphone off the desk and played with it a bit, an audio recording began to play.

“...llow the tracks back. We can just see the plains and mountains... They’re our lifeline.”

“Error... Trap. It might have been safer...”

“There were a lot of problems. I got scared and apologized.”

“How do you know it’s grandpa when he only has one leg?”

“Incomprehensible babbling...”

“...This is the end.”

It was hard to make out through the static, but the ones taking turns speaking nonsense were definitely me and Toriko.

“Is this a conversation?” Kozakura asked.

Unable to say anything back, Toriko and I looked at one another in a daze.

Having fallen silent, all we heard in our ears was the sound of a train off in the distance.

File 4: Time, Space, and a Middle-aged Man

1

We were standing in the middle of a field in the other world.

It was close to the end of June in the surface world we had left behind. Did the seasons affect this place, too? From the moment we were sucked into the other world, I was surprised by how humid it was. The air was clearly heavier than it had ever been before.

Though, that heaviness in the air might have been more than just the humidity... There was an awkwardness hanging in the air between us, too. In a situation like this, where two people who didn't know each other very well were forced to work together, that was probably inevitable.

Though, this time, it wasn't Toriko at my side.

It was Kozakura.

The diminutive woman who called herself a researcher of the other world glared, with an expression that did nothing to hide her displeasure, at the unknown world which spread out before our eyes.

"U-Um." Hesitantly, I opened my mouth. "Where should we start looking?"

"..."

There was no answer.

"Kozakura-san?"

"...Aren't you the one who'd know the places she's most likely to go, Sorawo-chan?"

"I don't know, either."

"Huh? What are we going to do, then?"

"For lack of a better option... look around at random..." I mumbled. Kozakura irritably shook her head.

"Honestly! That idiot!" Kozakura spat the words with contempt. "Getting me wrapped up in this nonsense, too! I'll kill her."

"...Good idea," I muttered.

I felt much the same as Kozakura right about now.

She was dead. So dead. When I find her, she's going to get it. How dare she up and disappear like this.

It was roughly three weeks after we'd returned from Kisaragi Station, on the 24th of May, that Toriko had vanished.

A few days before, we'd had a fight.

We were in the cafe behind the Junkudo bookstore in Ikebukuro, where we'd gone after meeting up. Toriko was enthusiastically trying to discuss plans for our next expedition when I spoke up. "Look, Toriko. Maybe reconsider? This is a bad way of handling it. We are so going to end up dead one of these days. Both of us."

For Toriko, who was searching for her "friend" Satsuki-san, she wanted to decide on a date for our next trip immediately. Honestly, I was burned out. Between the Kunekune, Hasshaku-sama, and Kisaragi Station, I'd been through a lot of bizarre encounters in short succession, and all of them had been so scary I could have died.

I figured I had to be within my rights to say, *Hey, I need a timeout.*

"Well, do you have a better way?"

The afternoon sun that streamed through the window made her golden locks shine. Toriko narrowed her eyes at me, as beautiful as one of the fairies that deceive people and take them away.

"Sorawo?"

"Uh... Right." I shook my head. I'd met her several times now, so it was about time I got used to it. Trying to get myself back on track, I reached for my drink.

Our meeting that day was supposed to be an after party, too. The table was covered with all the dishes Toriko had, yet again, ordered without thinking what would happen.

There was taco rice, chocolate and sour cherry cake, matcha terrine, and a "Japanese tart" topped with lots of raspberries. As for drinks, Toriko had a caffè latte, while I had ordered grape tea.

I think at this point I could say that the way Toriko went about ordering was weird and wrong. She could have at least waited to finish the taco rice before ordering the cake.

"If you had a better way, I'd be all ears. But you don't. We have to keep working at it, slow and steady."

"I never thought I'd hear the words 'slow and steady' come out of your mouth, Toriko."

"Huh? I think I've been taking it slow and steady all this time," Toriko said, as if hurt. She'd been taking it wild and reckless, though, hadn't she?

"Well, whatever. If you say so, Toriko. Still, even if we're going to search for Satsuki-san, we have no leads, right? Don't you think this is all a little haphazardly laid out?"

Toriko averted her eyes. "But..."

"No buts. I get that you want to find Satsuki-san as soon as possible, but don't you think we need to search properly if we want to do that?"

"I do think what you're saying is right, Sorawo. But there's no

time. Even as we're talking, Satsuki could be in danger."

"Even as we're talking, huh..."

I looked around the cafe. It was the afternoon, and many of the patrons were students from the nearby university. They were studying, reading, chatting, or having fun in their own ways. To a casual onlooker, we'd probably look like part of the group. Once they saw the mound of cakes and tea burying the table, no amount of excuses would convince them otherwise. Us, going into a dangerous place to save a friend who'd been stranded there? Surely you jest.

Toriko could be such a mess of contradictions. Despite all her rush to search for Satsuki, she still wanted to hold after parties, too. It was so careless. But, just when you thought she might not be serious, she'd turn around and display an incredible show of guts. I had felt like I was starting to understand Toriko after our third trip to the other world, but on further thought, no, I didn't get her that well after all.

Toriko went on. "Besides, we can't leave them there."

"Huh...?"

For a moment, I honestly didn't understand what Toriko was talking about.

"Those guys, the ones isolated at Kisaragi Station. If someone doesn't save them, they're all going to die."

"...Oh, the soldiers! Uhh, sure, yeah, I guess you're right, huh."

I'd completely forgotten about the U.S. soldiers at Kisaragi Station. It was true, they probably couldn't hold out for long. I know my head was full of my own problems, but still, for me to be able to leave people who I'd talked to behind in that situation, and then think nothing of it, made me pretty awful.

But, you know... Not to make excuses, but they'd treated us like monsters. The only ones we'd even been able to communicate with were that curly-haired lieutenant and the sergeant major, right?

"You were that concerned about them, Toriko? I'm surprised."

"Why?"

"You were acting more curt than usual with them. I thought you were pretty wary of them."

"I mean, they were agitated, and I didn't know when they might open fire."

"And you want to save the guys who came close to shooting us?"

"Being in that place would mess anyone up. Personally, if we can save them, I want to find a way to do it. Do you disagree?"

Toriko's earnest words hit me hard, and I struggled to breathe. It was like I'd been looking for excuses to leave them for dead, wasn't it?

Though, call me cruel and inhuman if you like, but I didn't want to take risks I didn't have to just because I got emotional. It was our own lives and sanity we'd be putting on the line here.

“...Toriko. Just now, you said it would mess anyone up. But the fact is, it’s already been messing us up. You remember the phone call with Kozakura-san?”

When I thought back to that, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. When we listened to the recording of the call we’d made from Kisaragi Station to Kozakura in the surface world, it was complete and utter nonsense. That meant Toriko and I had, without realizing it, been speaking bizarre words into the phone for an extended period of time.

I had heard before that a person who goes insane doesn’t recognize the wrongness of their own words and actions. There were all kinds of insanity, and you couldn’t wrap everything up under that one term, but it felt pretty apt to me here. We weren’t just, “starting to get messed up”—we might already be in a seriously bad state at this very moment.

“Yeah, but it was just that one time. We’re fine now, so—”

Toriko’s rebuttal seemed less than confident. No one could remain completely calm after learning they had lost control of their own actions.

Being as underhanded as I was, I decided to turn the knife.

“It’s not just you, Toriko. During the call, Kozakura-san got all messed up, too.”

When Kozakura had started saying strange things on the other end of the receiver, Toriko and I had been really unnerved.

“We only thought we heard that. Kozakura’s voice wasn’t on the recording, so—”

“It’s true that only our voices were on the recording, Toriko, but don’t you think that’s strange? If we were saying strange things to Kozakura-san, why would she stay quiet and listen the whole time?”

“Ah...” Toriko’s eyes went wide. I continued.

“We don’t know what happens when the other world and the surface world are connected by a phone call. It’s true that, in the surface world, Kozakura-san’s smartphone only recorded the bizarre things we were saying. But it’s also possible that, if we were recording in the other world, it would have picked up the bizarre things Kozakura-san said.”

“That’s... just your imagination, though, right? You have no basis for it...”

“What I’m trying to say is, the other world is having a negative influence on people. Both on us, and on Kozakura-san, too.”

“But researching the other world is Kozakura’s job.”

“So, if it’s her job, that makes it okay if it messes up her head?”

“It’s not fair to say it like that.” Toriko glared at me. “You were happy, weren’t you, Sorawo? You want money, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, of course I do. But it won’t do me any good if I’m

dead..." I hesitated a moment, then continued. "You must realize, right, Toriko?"

"Realize what?"

"About Satsuki-san. How many months has it been since you said she vanished? Three? Or was it more?"

Toriko didn't answer. The silence became oppressive, so I went on.

"She's been in that crazy world for three months, and there's been no word? There's no way you don't know what that means, Toriko. We've both seen it. The bodies of those killed by the Kunekune, the way old man Abarato disappeared, the U.S. soldiers dying off gradually. It hurts to say this, but..."

I knew I was treading on dangerous ground here, but once I opened my mouth, I couldn't close it.

"...Satsuki-san's not alive anymore."

There was silence. Toriko's shapely lips drew into a firm line, her eyes cast downwards.

I'd gone and said it.

I'd been thinking it all along, and I'd known I'd end up saying it someday. Still, now that I had a shocked Toriko in front of me, I couldn't suppress the sense of guilt.

"I-I may have said too much, but..."

"She's alive."

Toriko said definitively, cutting me off just as I started to spout what sounded like an excuse. Caught by surprise, I blinked.

"Satsuki is alive. No question."

"Huh? How can you—"

"It wouldn't be like her to die there." She was so full of confidence, I couldn't say another word. Just what kind of person *was* Satsuki-san to inspire this level of trust? At the very least, I was certain she was nothing like me.

"Satsuki is special to me. Please, help. If you want, I'll give you my share of the money, too."

"Huh?!"

I was dumbfounded for a moment, but then the blood rushed to my head.

You're saying something like that, Toriko?

You think I'm hesitating because my share's not large enough?

"Don't you need money?"

"That's not it!" I raised my voice in anger. "I get that Satsuki-san is really important to you. But she's not to me. I've never met her or even talked to her. You're telling me to risk my life for someone like that?"

Toriko's eyes widened in a way I'd never seen before, and she

stared at me. We looked at one another through the steam of her latte.

“Oh... Yeah. I get it.”

Toriko whispered, then looked away.

Standing, she retrieved her bag from the bin under the table meant for holding it.

“Sorry. It seems I misunderstood.”

“Hold on, Toriko.”

“I’ll manage the rest by myself somehow... Thanks.”

“Toriko!”

Ignoring me as I called after her, Toriko left the cafe.

“...Ugh.”

I leaned back in my chair, sighing.

Not only was I underhanded, I was a gutless coward, too.

This is what I really wanted to say:

I’m scared, and I don’t want to get my head messed up any worse.

Let’s stop...

But I couldn’t. Because if I did, I was sure I’d disappoint her. What Toriko needed was a partner who could explore the Otherside with her, not some frightened baggage that would only weigh her down.

That’s why I’d said it in a roundabout way, and in the end, I still ended up disappointing her.

What was I even doing?

I sat there, with a mountain of barely-touched cakes in front of me, at a loss for what to do.

“I think it’s a bit much to expect me to eat all this myself, you know?” I muttered, glaring at the empty seat across from me.

2

“Did you two have a fight or something?”

That was the first thing Kozakura said when she picked up the phone, and I struggled to find my next words.

“...Why do you say that?”

“She came to my place alone the other day. Normally, she’s as noisy as a child in elementary school, and it’s annoying, but this time she was so lifeless it was annoying in another way. Could you leave me out of your little lovers’ quarrel? It’s a nuisance.”

“S-Sorry.” I apologized despite myself, but then got indignant. What was she calling a lovers’ quarrel?

“Um, when was that?”

“Three days ago.”

“I see...”

“How long has it been since you were last in contact?”

“Five days.”

“Hmm. I guess that means she was more fragile than you, huh. Well, not that knowing that does me any good.”

“What do you mean?”

“You two fight, and can’t apologize, but neither of you has the guts to contact the other. So you make a call to me, a mutual acquaintance, looking to find an excuse to talk. For Toriko, it took two days, but for you, it took five.”

“Urkh...”

I heard Kozakura snort on the other side of the phone.

“I’ll have you know, I did at least try to contact her. But I got no response.”

“Oh, what a nuisance. It’s a nuisance that you’re both so pathetic.”

“Urrrgh,” I groaned. Kozakura went on as if this was all such a bother.

“Sigh... Do you want her personal information?”

“What?”

“The address of Toriko’s house. Why not try going in person?”

I didn’t hesitate for long. “P-Please. I want her info...”

“I’ll send it over.”

“Sorry for the trouble...”

“Don’t thank me. Just send gifts for Obon in summer.”

The address I got from Kozakura was for an apartment building in Nippori. It was on the top floor of a four-story building, and she apparently lived alone.

I headed out the next morning. It wasn’t a particularly new building, but it still looked expensive. I hated that my reflexive reaction was—*Little Miss Moneybags sure lives in a nice place, doesn’t she?*

I hit a bit of a stumbling block when the automated door at the entrance wouldn’t open. It took me a good five minutes to realize that there was a panel with a number pad, and this was one of those places where you had to dial a room number and have a resident buzz you in.

I’d been thinking I could just go up to her front door and press the doorbell, so this really killed my momentum. After glaring at the panel for a while, I found the resolve to reach out and press the buttons.

4-0-4. That should have made the bell ring in Toriko’s room. I stood there, feeling antsy, and then there was static from the speaker.

“... Yes.”

“Uh-Um, Toriko? It’s me.”

“Yes?”

“It’s Kamikoshi...”

“Yes.”

No, Yes, is not what you say there.

I suppressed my irritation at her curt response and said, “Sorry to show up out of nowhere. I got your address from Kozakura-san. Can I come in for a moment?”

“...”

The speaker said nothing more, and then it cut out with more static.

At the same time, the door to the entrance hall opened.

What was her problem? Couldn’t she say a bit more than that?

Fuming silently to myself, I entered the apartment building. I got in the elevator and pressed the fourth floor button. It arrived as I was idly looking at the notice posted on the wall about the water storage tank being cleaned.

Room 404 was at the end of the corridor on the fourth floor. I walked down the quiet hall. On the other side of a chest-high wall, I could see the streets spread out below. Under the clear skies, people and cars went up and down the hill road that went to the station. It was noon on a weekend, so the area was pretty lively. I could clearly make out the announcements from the station and the sound of trains driving past.

Ever since I started going to the Otherside, there were moments like this, where the sounds of human habitation, which once would have irked me, instead made me feel incredibly calm. Before, I’d have thought, *Ugh, what a racket, I hope they all die*. I still thought that sometimes now, but I could tell I had mellowed out compared to how I was in my thorny high school days. That was in part because I had experienced the terror of silence in the other world, and in part—frustrating as it was to admit this—because I had met Toriko.

Standing in front of Room 404, I looked into the peephole on the door.

Okay, Toriko, I’m here to make up. Now give up and get out here.

When I pushed the doorbell, I heard bumping noises from inside.

I don’t know what she’s panicking for now... As I smiled at the way that even the easygoing Toriko could get flustered if you suddenly turned up at her door, the footsteps got more intense. The thudding made it sound like she was running in circles around the house.

Okay, she was panicking a bit too much.

“Toriko? You can take it easy, you know?”

When I called out through the door, the footsteps stopped for a moment, and then rapidly came closer.

Bam! Bam! Bam, bam, bam, bam! Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bam!

“Bwuh?!”

I was shocked by the sound of footsteps racing towards the door.

As I leaned back reflexively, the door... did not open.

The footsteps made it sound like she had charged in at top speed, but now all was quiet.

“Tori... ko?”

As I held my chest to quell my racing heart, I called out to her in a hoarse voice. There was no response. If I were to judge by sound alone, she had to be standing right on the other side of the door, though...

No, maybe she had collapsed there?

I grew a little concerned, and reached for the door handle. It moved. It wasn't locked.

“Toriko, you okay? I'm opening the door...?”

As I said that, I turned the handle downward, and pulled.

Hesitantly, I peered inside through the gap—and I gasped out loud.

The other side of the door was filled with a blue light. Blue, and opaque. I lost my sense of distance, and it felt as if the blue might suck me in. Beyond it, there was this unknown shining. Struck with the fear that the shimmering light, which resembled the way the sun looked when seen from underwater, was gradually getting closer, I reflexively shut the door.

I backed away one step, then two, never taking my eyes off the door.

There was no doubt about it. It was *that* blue, the one I had seen the day I first met Toriko, in the abandoned building in Oomiya. The light I had seen beyond the torii-shaped construct that disguised itself as Hasshaku-sama, and the light above the monster we encountered at Kisaragi Station, they were both this same blue.

I stiffened for a moment, convinced the blue light would break down the unlocked door and come spilling out, but there was no sign of movement, and there was no sound.

It's just like the abandoned building in Oomiya.

That time, we'd been surprised by the knocking at the door, and when we looked through the peephole, there was a world of blue.

If this was the same pattern as that, the next time I opened the door, it might have returned to normal.

I reached for the door handle one more time, and slowly opened it.

On the other side, it was still blue.

“Seriously...?” I mumbled to myself in disbelief as I slowly closed the door.

Why was Toriko's room filled with an otherworldly blue?

And... what had happened to Toriko?

Was she in there?

Or had she gone somewhere else, like Abarato?

My legs had started to quake. I didn't know what to do.

When I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself, I looked outside the corridor and noticed something odd.

It was too quiet. I didn't hear the sound of running trains, which I had been able to hear until not that long ago.

I put my hand on the wall and looked around outside. There were no people walking by, and no cars to be seen.

"Hold on..." My whisper faded vainly into the air.

Struck by an intense feeling of unease, I broke into a run. When I pressed the call button for the elevator—thank goodness, it worked. Too frustrated to wait, I got in the elevator that came, and pressed the button for the first floor. I pounded that button repeatedly. The door slowly closed.

In the elevator going down, my eyes happened to stop on the piece of paper posted there.

Notice of Cleaning for the Water Tank

Dear Residents,

Due to the repeated complaints of hair coming out of people's faucets, there was an investigation. The disappearance of the person in charge delayed our response, but a source of hair was found inside the tank, and the appropriate measures will be taken. We apologize for this.

...Was this written here last time I looked?

Before I could process the feeling of wrongness that was rising inside me, the elevator reached the first floor. I rushed through the entrance hall, and left the apartment building. I stood in the middle of the road, looking both ways. Nobody was there!

For as far as I could see, I was the only thing moving. The city was covered in a terrifying silence reminiscent of the Otherside. It was like I was the only one alive in the whole world.

I stood there, as if frozen, when suddenly my smartphone rang. I was so shocked I jumped up into the air. Digging through my bag, I hastily pulled out my phone. Was it Toriko, or Kozakura? I didn't care who. If I could just hear a voice other than my own, I'd feel relieved.

However, when I looked at the screen, it made me furrow my brow even more.

The caller ID read “ルO及O世了.”

More text corruption? Ever since it had gotten immersed in the water of the other world, this smartphone was acting kind of weird. It was supposed to have been repaired, though...

Regardless, I pressed the talk icon, and answered the phone.

“...Yes?”

“Ah! *There you are.*”

“Yes?”

It was an unfamiliar male voice. As I stood there in bewilderment, the man spoke my name.

“*Sorawo Kamikoshi, right?*”

“Yes,” I responded without meaning to, then regretted it. Uh, oh. That was careless.

As I became wary, too late, the man continued speaking in a worried tone.

“*Oh, I’ll be right there. Stay right where you are!*”

By the time I was able to ask, “...Um, who are you?” the call had already been terminated.

Then, from behind me, I heard a voice.

“Yes, that’s right. I found her. I’ll deal with it immediately.”

When I turned around, a man wearing working clothes that were somewhere between gray and blue was trudging down the road towards me. It was a middle-aged guy I didn’t know. I could see a mark like a windmill or a flower on his uniform.

Walking up to me, as I felt a threat to my continued well-being and was getting ready to run, the man let out an irritated sigh.

“You can’t do this. Give up on that girl and go home!”

“Huh?”

“If you don’t, next time, you won’t be able to go back.”

The man spoke in a threatening tone, and then the next moment I heard the sound of a horn.

I screamed and pulled back as a car scraped past me.

The next thing I knew, the sounds of a bustling city had returned. The people walking by looked suspiciously at me for having walked out into the road.

“I’m... back?”

Fighting the urge to collapse in relief, I fled back to the sidewalk.

While I was clinging to a telephone pole and catching my breath, it finally came to me.

The internet ghost story known as, “The Space-time Man.”

3

Here’s how stories about the “Space-time Man” went.

The person experiencing the story would suddenly wander into a world where there was no one else. At school, on their way to work, or in some other place they were used to being, they would suddenly realize everyone else had vanished. There, in a place where they are the only person around, the person experiencing the story would

encounter a middle-aged man. The man wore work clothes, often of the kind that would make you think he was a janitor, and he would be surprised to see the person experiencing the story. He would get unreasonably mad, saying things like, "What are you doing here?" and "Hurry up and get out," or giving incomprehensible warnings, and then, suddenly, the person experiencing the story would notice they had returned to their original world.

There were a number of variations in the details, but the fundamental flow of events matched what I had just experienced.

This story, like Kisaragi Station, belonged to the "wandered into another world" genre of ghost stories. The man was watching out for intruders into another world. That he was a guard who sent back those who wandered in unintentionally, or perhaps a member of some organization of watchers was a common interpretation.

I ground my teeth in frustration. I should have "looked" more closely. Maybe it would be better if I didn't wear the contact in my right eye after all. When I put in the color contact, it limited my eye's ability, making it hard to use it on the spur of the moment. But it made me stand out too much without it...

Hold on. The reason Toriko's room had ended up like that might have been because I'd unwittingly wandered into another world at some point. Into the man's world, which looked like the surface world, only without people.

The note posted in the elevator had been strange, too. The creepy things written there just weren't possible. Even if someone *had* died in the building's water tank, they'd have worded it more delicately.

I remembered how, last time, when we were leaving the tavern where we had our after party, there was already an unsettling feeling in the air. If we slowly moved to the other world from the surface world, without using a clearly defined entrance, we might pass through a transitory zone between the two worlds. The boundary between the sane and insane, where the staff of the tavern went crazy, dogs barked in the kitchen, people vanished from the city, and postings became nonsensical. I could hypothesize that that had been the man's world.

If so, then... now that I was out of there, was it possible Toriko's room had returned to normal?

Tearing myself away from the telephone pole I had been clinging to, I raced back to the apartment. There, I rushed to the panel at the entrance and dialed 404.

...No response.

Uh, oh. If someone didn't disable the lock from inside, the automatic door at the entrance wouldn't open.

Could I wait for another resident to enter, then sneak in behind

them?

If I waited patiently, I might be able to get in, but given I was concerned about Toriko's situation right now, I couldn't wait around. When, for lack of other options, I pulled out my phone to try calling Toriko one more time, I noticed I had gotten a number of messages at some point.

The sender was... me.

"...Me?"

Unable to figure out what was going on, I opened the messages. There was no text. It looked like I'd just sent images.

They were pictures of Toriko.

There was a shot of her entering *that* building in Jinbouchou, taken from behind. She wore her army surplus jacket, a pair of jeans, and lace-up boots. There was a cap on her head, and she was carrying the kind of backpack you might take when going mountain climbing. She was clearly geared up for an expedition to the other world.

There were four pictures, taken from different angles. The way they were out of focus, slightly at an angle, and had some digital noise in them made it look like they had been taken surreptitiously. The last of them was taken from almost right in front of Toriko, but there was no sign of her noticing.

The timestamps on the photos were from just ten minutes ago. Right when I was panicking up on the fourth floor. Naturally, I had no memory of taking any of these. Moreover, it said I had received them yesterday, at the same time as I was talking to Kozakura on the phone.

"What is this?! The times and places make no sense!"

Here I was, at the entrance to an apartment building where other people lived, but I shouted out loud despite myself. I know I wouldn't be able to complain if someone got mad at me for it, but this was just too incomprehensible. The events were creepy when taken alone, but when they occurred in sequence like this, my frustration at the unfairness of it all won out.

Okay, calm down... Let's sort this all out.

I went outside the apartment, and looked up at the fourth floor.

Let's see... I called Toriko from the front entrance, there was a response, and then the automatic door opened.

Then, when I went to Toriko's room, it was full of blue light.

When I moved away from the room, the world got all messed up. Either that, or I entered the man's world.

After that, I got a call from the Space-time Man, and was returned to my original world.

During that time, Toriko was heading to the other world from Jinbouchou, a long way from here, and someone sent me pictures of her.

“What is this...?”

I unconsciously clutched my head. None of the pieces fit together. Each individual event progressed on its own, so there was no way to sort it all out.

Still, if these photos were to be believed, I knew where Toriko was. She'd gone to the other world, searching for Satsuki-san.

Was it okay to leave her alone? Toriko couldn't see glitches, but she had to be more used to the other world than I was. She'd apparently been there with Satsuki-san, and I knew for a fact that she'd been there several times before she ever met me. She had a hand that could grab substances from the other world now, too.

If she's pining for Satsuki-san that badly, and she's just fine without me, then let her do what she wants... was the thought that passed through my head, but then I realized something unpleasant.

It was the third photo, taken from an angle diagonally down and to the left of Toriko, in the dimly lit hall of the building. In the corner of it, I could see someone's reflection.

The blood drained from my face.

That figure, with the hood of her parka pulled low over her face, was me.

In the shadow of her hood was the glint of my lapis lazuli right eye. My expression as I looked at Toriko was warped and ugly, as if revealing the feelings I held deep inside.

Obviously, this wasn't me in the picture here. Yet still, looking at the many feelings for Toriko I could see from here, I was hit with a shock so hard it felt like I'd been punched.

The picture was impossible, but those feelings were the truth.

To say it another way—"I saw myself in her." The me who had that vile look on her face was only captured in the third photo. Looking at the angles, it wouldn't have been strange for her to have appeared in any of the others, but there was no sign of her in the other photos. Toriko showed no sign of noticing her, either.

Was this what they called a spirit photo? Whatever she really was, my doppelganger's gaze was fixed on Toriko, and the look in her eyes was concerning.

I stood still for a while, then finally I started to walk. I left the apartment behind and turned back to the station.

There had been something wrong with me. I couldn't believe I'd thought, even for a second, that it was okay to leave Toriko alone when she had gone to the other world by herself.

The unforgettable words of the Space-time Man came back into my mind.

“Give up on that girl and go home,” was it?

Considering the situation, he had to have been talking about

Toriko.

He said something about me not being able to come back next time, but he shouldn't have taken me so lightly. I don't know who the old guy was, but if he thought a threat like that would deter me, he had another thing coming. I was heading straight to Jinbouchou, after Toriko... and I was going to bring her back. It was beyond reckless of her to go alone when she couldn't even see glitches, and I was going to give her an earful about it.

I descended the hill road to the station, snorting fiercely, but as I was walking I reconsidered.

No, no, it would be far too careless to go dressed like this.

I should go home first, get my equipment together. I need the gun, after all.

Is there anything I need to buy? I'll want a flashlight for when it's night, and food, too...

If I head back and then set out now, it will take at least two hours. Longer if I go shopping. I want to avoid the search dragging on so long it becomes night over there. Maybe I should just hold off for today, and go tomorrow instead?

The more I thought, the heavier my feet became.

Huh?

What was wrong with me? For some reason, my feet weren't moving forward.

My breathing was labored. My chest ached. My mouth felt dry.

I'm scared.

That's right. I was scared.

I was terrified of going to the Otherside. That feeling, which seemed so natural now that I had named it, slowly seeped into me, slowing my feet until... finally, they stopped.

I had nearly forgotten how terrifying it was to go into that place, with its unknown dangers, all alone.

Was that possible? For me, who had been so close to death so many times, to have forgotten how frightening the other world was?

I knew all too well why I had.

Toriko.

The reason I had been fine in that place filled with madness and malice was that Toriko had been at my side.

Each of us sort of knew the other's weaknesses, but we could still trust them to watch our back. No matter how crazy the situation, if we were holding hands, that was all it took to keep me calm. She was a partner like no other. With Toriko gone, the fear of the other world, which I had been able to distract myself from before now, came back with a vengeance, and it was leaving me unable to take another step.

Oh, Toriko, you're so amazing. It's a wonder you could go to a place

like that alone.

Aren't you scared?

No—she HAS to be scared.

When the Kunekune almost got us, and when Kozakura started acting weird on the other end of the phone, Toriko had been properly frightened.

You're scared, but you still went.

Just how gutsy are you, Toriko?

Just how much does Satsuki-san mean to you?

I... I can do it, too. I'm going.

Just you watch me, damn it.

4

“So, why did you come to my place?”

Unable to meet the irritable Kozakura's eyes, I looked down at the mug filled with hot cola that was sitting on her desk. “Um, I thought maybe... you could come with me...”

“No way. Too much of a bother.”

Her instant rejection made me panic. “Toriko went there alone, okay?! Her room was all screwed up, too, and I got sent these weird pictures, and there's definitely something bad going on here!”

As soon as I arrived at her mansion here in Shakujii-kouen, I'd told Kozakura the story of what happened at Toriko's apartment. Despite that, Kozakura was uninterested.

“I get that it's bad, but why does that mean I should have to go?”

“Huh...?”

This was unexpected, so I stared at her. Looking like she thought it was too much of a bother, she went on. “You're all dressed up and raring to go. Why don't you just go and not invite me along? If you keep dawdling, the sun's going to set, you know?”

That was true—ultimately, I had gotten my equipment in order before coming. I had the Makarov stowed in the bottom of my bag, and on the way here from my home in Minami-Yono, I'd stopped at the LOFT in Ikebukuro to pick up a flashlight. Like Kozakura was saying, I might have been better off heading straight to Jinbouchou. But...

“Kozakura-san, you're not worried about Toriko?”

“I'm not suited for field work, that's all. I don't like jumping and running around like the two of you, so I don't want to go outside.”

“Hey, it's not exactly my specialty, either.”

“The moment you went diving into that place, you showed you had the potential for it. Come on, get going already.”

“The thing is... I'm, uh, afraid to go alone...”

“Huh?! After everything you’ve been through? You got scared by a spirit photo, and now you need me to go to the bathroom with you?”

“I don’t think it’s on the same level as that...”

“Going to the washroom with other people was never my thing.”

Kozakura took a deep breath. “Well, let me see it. What’s this strange photo?”

I reluctantly booted up my smartphone, opened the message window, then passed it to her. I had told her about the phenomenon I had encountered at the apartment, but I hadn’t shown her the photos yet. I didn’t want her to see the expression that I (though it wasn’t me) was looking at Toriko with.

“Hmm... A Sorawo-chan doppelganger, huh. Fascinating. That’s one nasty face.”

“It’s *my* face.”

“And your point is...? Hm?”

Kozakura’s fingers which were scrolling the screen came to a stop.

“Hey... Hold on. What is this?”

The screen which Kozakura thrust towards me displayed another picture, one I hadn’t seen before.

It was a woman in black standing in front of a ruined building, half-buried in the grass. The image quality was bad, and it was blurry, but I could make out her stark black hair and thick-rimmed glasses.

“Huh? Where was this photo...?”

“Before the four with Toriko. The date’s... May 14th.”

That was the day I’d first met Toriko.

“I never noticed it. Is it someone you know?”

Kozakura didn’t immediately answer my question.

“Kozakura-san?”

“Yeah. I know her. I know her well,” Kozakura said in a whisper. “Satsuki Uruma. The person Toriko’s been looking for.”

This was her...

I looked back to the photo again. Seeing “Satsuki-san” for the first time, I noted that she was quite tall, though not as tall as Hasshaku-sama. There was a certain grace in her pose, her face turned away from the camera, and I found her striking even in this grainy image.

“You’re saying you never noticed this photo before now?”

“R-Right.”

There was doubt in her eyes, but Kozakura quickly looked away from me.

“I don’t like it.”

Kozakura groaned. Her elbows on her desk, she pressed her fingers against her temples.

“Unreasonable events clustered together... forming a seemingly meaningful context... yet with no clear indicator whether this is a

malicious threat, or a benevolent sign..." she muttered to herself, then ominously added, "Just like with Satsuki."

Then a chime rang, and both of us turned to look at one other. It was the doorbell.

Kozakura hesitated a moment before reaching for the keyboard. One of the monitors switched over to a color video feed. It displayed the entrance distorted through a fisheye lens. There were three middle-aged ladies standing there.

"Who is it?" Kozakura asked through the mic, and the woman in the middle responded.

"I'm sorry to bother you. We have some questions regarding the person who lives next door."

"Next door? I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't socialize with the neighbors."

"It's awkward to discuss at the door, could we speak with you directly?"

"Maybe it is, but I don't know anything. Who are you people anyway?"

"Relatives. It won't take long, could I ask you to open the door?"

"Not happening. I told you, I don't know anything."

I stared at the screen as Kozakura brusquely handled the three women. Something felt off. There was nothing especially bizarre about their appearance... or so I thought, but then it suddenly hit me. The three of them were awfully big. They had broad shoulders, and their blouses and skirts didn't fit.

The middle-aged woman stubbornly continued to ask Kozakura to open the door. When I saw the way she persisted, as if she didn't understand the words being spoken to her, even once Kozakura raised her voice, it kind of creeped me out.

Then, I noticed a small mark on the woman's chest. It was blurred by the camera, but the shape made me think of a windmill or flower, and—

Instantly, I reached out and snatched the mic away from Kozakura.

"Whoa, what's wrong, Sorawo-chan?"

"It might be better not to talk with them," I said in a whisper, still holding the mic. "They might be like the Time-space Man..."

Kozakura's eyes widened as if she'd realized something.

"Could they be the MIB?"

I pointed at Kozakura despite myself, and nodded in fervent agreement.

"Yeah! That's it! They're the MIB, in a sense!"

Even though we had creepy visitors at the door ringing the bell, seeing how quick Kozakura caught on to what I was saying got me

fired up.

The Men in Black. A group of black-suited men who visited those who encountered UFOs.

They spoke like agents of the government, saying things like “don’t disclose information about the UFO to any other parties” or “we’ll erase all of your memories,” but on closer inspection, their actions were bizarre, and they exhibited physical traits that didn’t seem entirely human. They often came up in American accounts of UFO sightings.

“In Japan, accounts of encounters with the MIB aren’t common. If we assume that the MIB in America are a local manifestation based on the distrust that the people there hold for the CIA and other governmental agencies, then in Japan, if *something* was going to suddenly visit your home, it might take the form of a middle-aged man or woman who was acting suspiciously. In fact, I remember reading a number of experience reports that featured a visitation by a group of two or three strange middle-aged women. I can’t imagine there have been enough for it to form a pattern, though,” I rambled on, speaking quickly.

Kozakura cut the mic, leaning back in her chair and looking at the three women on screen.

“Then these three aren’t the middle-aged women they appear to be.”

“Right. I think the Time-space Man was the same.”

In the accounts online, the Time-space Man was interpreted as a guard monitoring for intrusions into another world.

However, for some time now, I had been unable to dispel the feeling that something was wrong with that interpretation. This guard or watcher stuff... it was just too “easy” of an explanation. Especially now that I knew about the Otherside, it seemed like a joke. In that place which defied logic, filled with madness and the unknown, was there room for such an easily understood job(?) to exist?

“The guy we met that time we encountered Hasshaku-sama, Abarato, told us something. He said that pseudo-humans from the other world stalked him on this side. I thought it was a paranoid delusion at the time, but maybe it wasn’t complete nonsense.”

“The Time-space Man was trying to make you stay away from the other world, but these middle-aged women came here on their own. Isn’t that contradictory? Are they playing Good Cop, Bad Cop to shake us up?”

“I don’t think that’s it. The man told me to go back, and he threatened me, but he also said to give up on Toriko. Nobody would just give up after being told to like that, right?”

“Mmm, that depends on the person, doesn’t it?”

“Y-You think...? Well, anyway, I don’t think we need to spend all that much thought on what their intentions are. They’re forming sentences, but they’re like bots, there’s no meaning behind it...”

“It’s true they don’t appear to have a proper sense of purpose,” Kozakura said quietly, looking at the video. Even without any response from us, the woman in the center was still saying something. The women on either side kept their mouths shut, neither of them changing their posture in the slightest.

“You called them bots, but they could be a phenomenon... maybe.”

“What does that mean?”

“We should interpret all of these sorts of events as a single phenomenon. The phenomenon that accompanies encountering the Time-space Man. The MIB, and these three women... they make it confusing because they take human form, but they’re an experience, no different from waking up with sleep paralysis, or hearing rapping noises...”

When Kozakura finished speaking, there was a change in the video.

The woman who was talking all this time closed her mouth, formed a fist, and began knocking on the door. The woman on the right grabbed the doorknob, and started pulling on it with all her strength. The woman on the left reached for the doorbell, and repeatedly rang it.

Knock, knock, knock, clatter, rattle, rattle, rattle, ding-ding-ding-ding, ding-dong, ding-dong—

While the three crazed women assaulted the front door, their faces on camera became horribly distorted. They turned into pixelated masses where you couldn’t make out their features.

Even from inside Kozakura’s room, we could hear the incredible racket at the entrance. I didn’t know how strong they were, but the metal of the hinges and doorknob was creaking. The way things were going, they might bust down the door.

“I-Is this a ‘phenomenon,’ too?” I asked in a quivering voice, and Kozakura responded with a forced smile.

“No matter how intense the experience, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a phenomenon. Probably.”

“Then there’s no way to distinguish it from reality, right?”

“Especially if it’s being experienced by multiple people at the same time.”

Kozakura got down from her chair, then walked over to one corner of the room. She started moving aside a tower of books by splitting it into smaller piles.

“If this is a phenomenon which humans experience from time to

time, whether that is in connection with UFOs, or with the Time-space Man, then what meaning does it hold exactly?" Kozakura asked.

"I couldn't say... In the field of true ghost stories, individual experiences and phenomena have no meaning. We can only say that they're unreasonable."

Kozakura shook her head. "You can't just give up on interpreting things there. If the reflection of an external entity in our perception is not true to reality, then there's something strange happening in our cognitive process."

While I was thinking she could occasionally talk a bit like a researcher, Kozakura finished moving the books, revealing a secret hatch. When she crouched and opened the hatch, I felt some slightly cooler air brush against my feet. It seemed there was a storage space under the floor there. I took a peek from behind her, wondering what could be inside, and Kozakura pulled out a large firearm, making me back away in fear.

"Whoa, what is that?"

"A Remington M870. It's an ordinary 12 gauge shotgun."

"No, but what are you planning to do with that ordinary shotgun?"

Kozakura sat cross-legged on the floor, loading cylindrical cartridges into the gun one by one. "I've tried to keep my distance from the other world all this time, but if they've come to me, what else is there to do? I don't want them wrecking my front entranceway."

When she finished loading the gun, Kozakura stood up. Compared with the imposing shotgun she now held, her slim body looked even smaller than her roughly 140 centimeters.

"Step aside. It's dangerous."

"I'll go with you."

"You don't have to push yourself."

Kozakura left me behind in the room. I hurriedly dug through my bag, pulled out the Makarov and followed her.

I could see the entranceway at the end of the dark hall. The doorbell wouldn't stop ringing. The door creaked with each blow, and through the ground glass window I could see a shadowy figure the size of a sumo wrestler moving around violently.

I caught up to the shotgun-toting Kozakura, and proceeded to the entrance.

"Hey! Cut it out! I'll shoot!" Kozakura shouted, pulling the slide on her weapon, and pointing the muzzle towards the door. Behind her, I readied my gun, too.

Suddenly, the ringing of the doorbell and the rattling of the door stopped, and all fell silent. The shadow on the other side of the glass

had ceased moving.

“...Wh-What now?”

“Go open it.”

“Me?!”

“I can’t get my work done until they’re chased off.”

Putting my shoes on, I hesitantly approached the door. I put the chain on, then turned the lock and opened the door. There was no sound from the other side.

Huh? This situation...

“Kozakura, I know this one.”

“What?”

“It’s the same as the ruined building in Oomiya and Toriko’s room. There were violent noises on the other side of the door, and then when it was opened there was nothing there. Now that I think about it, it’s a common pattern in true ghost stories, too.”

“We’re being stalked by a horror cliché?” Kozakura was dubious.

“A classic one, too. In the old days, they’d have called it *tanuki-bayashi*, strange sounds thought to be caused by tanuki.”

“If this really was the work of tanuki, that would be too funny. So, if we open the door, there’ll be no one there, then?”

“P-Probably,” I answered, but I could still see a figure on the other side of the glass.

I couldn’t help but think, *If only Toriko were here*. If Toriko were with us, I could have remained calm, even in this tense situation.

Hesitantly, I gripped the doorknob, then carefully turned it. Pointing my gun at the gap in the door, I slowly pushed it open.

...No one was there.

“I thought so.” I had half-predicted this, but I still let out a sigh of relief. At some point, the figure on the other side of the glass had vanished.

“Well?”

“No one’s there.”

When I turned back to look, Kozakura stepped down from the raised threshold and put on a pair of sandals.

Hm? I just realized this, but I just got used as a scout, didn’t I?

As I was grappling with that strange feeling, Kozakura wedged herself between me and the door I was holding in order to take a look outside. When I lowered my gaze, I could see the top of her head. She was so tiny...

“What do you think, Sorawo-chan?” Kozakura asked as she peered out through the gap.

“I’m gradually starting to understand. Entities from the other world appear in the context of weird tales humans tell. The Kunekune, Hashshaku-sama, and Kisaragi Station were all like that. Maybe when

they exert their influence on this side, it's the same."

"If so, why stop short like this? This isn't an assault, it's a ding-dong dash. It's almost like they're going out of their way to try and frighten us..."

She was looking outside as she grumbled, so I opened the door as wide as the chain would allow for Kozakura's benefit.

That was when a giant face suddenly appeared out of the shadow of the door.

The woman's face must have been two meters across, and it was so close we could make out the pores on her face. Her lips which were the size of tires moved as she spoke in a strangely drawn out voice.

"Leeeeet meeee iiiin."

"Gahhhh!"

As Kozakura and I screamed in unison, the face lunged. Kozakura recoiled so hard she fell over, but I caught her.

Before we knew what had happened, the face rushed in through the door which should have been held shut by the chain.

In my arms, Kozakura raised the shotgun and pulled the trigger. The sound of the point-blank gunshot and the flash from the barrel made me involuntarily shut my eyes tight, and I felt a rotten wind rush by.

When the wind passed, a warm, heavy air remained. Hesitantly, I opened my eyes, and found we were standing in a grassy field with nothing around to block our view.

The face, Kozakura's house—all of it was gone.

Smoke and the smell of gunpowder rose from the muzzle of Kozakura's shotgun up into the skies of the Otherside.

"A-Are you okay...?" I asked, snapping a dazed Kozakura back to reality.

"Huh?! The hell is this?! What am I supposed to do, being thrown out here in this state?! Are you trying to kill me?!" Tearing herself away from me, Kozakura kept shouting. I couldn't blame her. A baggy T-shirt and spats, with clogs on her bare feet. Unlike me, she was totally wearing indoor clothes.

"What is this?! Hitting us with a sucker punch like that! It's not fair!" Kozakura raged, prowling back and forth in front of me like a caged mountain cat.

While still trying to recover from the shock of it myself, I spoke up quietly. "U-Um. I don't think there's much we can do about it now. But, hey, now that we're in the Otherside anyways, why don't you help me look for Toriko?"

Kozakura stopped, turned back, and stared up at me. "Sorawo-chan... You've got a *real nice* personality, you know that?"

"Huh?"

While I was still taken aback, Kozakura hung her head and sighed.

“Ugh... Oh, whatever, fine.”

“Th-Thank you...” My words of thanks were swept away by the lukewarm wind.

Kozakura and I stood there, both feeling awkward.

Still, we had to search for Toriko.

5

We started by heading for a spot with a good view to get the lay of the land. The fields of the Otherside sloped gently up and down, and there were places high enough that you could call hills.

There was nothing in the place where we had appeared, so we decided that I would walk in front, beating a trail for us. This tall grass was harsh on Kozakura’s bare legs.

Before we got walking, I remembered to take out my color contact. Though they were pretty hard to see under the daylight, this did make it possible to perceive the shining of the glitches. Fortunately, I didn’t see many around. Even in the Otherside, it seemed there was an uneven distribution of glitches.

“Are your legs all right, Kozakura-san?” I called out behind me as I stomped down the grass. “Um, if I’m going too fast, let me know. I’ll match your pace.”

“...Yeah.” Perhaps on the rebound from her earlier rage, she was being awfully quiet.

When I turned back to look, Kozakura was looking down, as if deep in thought. “Listen, Sorawo-chan.”

“Y-Yes?”

With an air of importance, Kozakura started to speak. “To give you an example: when you go inside a haunted house, there are some people who are just fine, while others are too scared to take a step, right?”

“I’ve never been inside a haunted house...”

“Me neither.”

Then why use that as your example?

“Well, it can be horror movies, or anything else, really. Anyway, tolerance for fear varies from person to person. This is a purely physiological issue. It’s determined by the degree to which the fear signals coming from the amygdala, deep inside the brain, exert control over the frontal lobe. Whether a person is easily frightened or not is determined by genetics. If the serotonin transporter gene’s activation sequence is long, more serotonin is produced in the nervous cells, and the tendency towards unease is lessened. Which is to say, you get less scared.”

“Right...”

While I was confused about what she was getting at, Kozakura turned an annoyed eye towards me. “Basically, my serotonin transporter gene is short...”

“Ohh! You’re a real scaredy-cat, then?”

“That’s right!” Kozakura snapped.

“Why are you getting mad?”

“I’m not mad! Damn it, I can’t handle this place.”

“You can’t?”

“I’m scared. Scared to death. I never wanted to come here again.”

I was surprised by this unexpected confession.

“Whaaa? But didn’t you say you were doing a joint research project on the other world with Satsuki-san before?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t as bad when Satsuki was around, but even then I was only able to enter the other world three times. Once I refused to do the field work, Satsuki and I gradually stopped getting along so well. Eventually, she brought in one of the students she was tutoring. Said she was her new partner.”

“That was...”

She’s talking about Toriko.

“Toriko was the opposite of me. She had a resistance to fear. The perfect choice for Satsuki’s partner. Unafraid, able to use a gun, and loyal to Satsuki. The woman was practically born to come here.”

I felt there were some implications to be unpacked in the way she said that.

“What did Toriko think about it?”

“She was head over heels for Satsuki, of course. She had some wits about her, but she was still just a high school girl, unfamiliar with the workings of the world. It took no time for Satsuki to win her over. It was always like that with Satsuki, though. She charmed anyone who came near her, using them as she pleased. A natural born alpha female.”

There was an indescribable frustration in Kozakura’s voice as she spoke. While I was considering how I should respond, Kozakura seemed to come to her senses and returned to the topic at hand.

“What I’m trying to say is, if something attacks us here, I doubt I’m going to be any help, so watch yourself.”

“That can’t be right. I mean, you’ve got a shotgun. It’ll be fine.”

“Ahh... The shotgun, right. Satsuki gave it to me, saying it was so I could hit things even with my eyes closed. Here, look.”

When I looked closely, on the muzzle, there was a part with deep cuts in it. It was shaped like the mouth of an alligator.

“The GATOR shotgun spreader. You put one of these on, and it spreads the shot horizontally. It turns a broad, fan-shaped area in

front of you into a kill zone. So, listen, if there's an emergency, make sure you're not standing in front of me. Because I'll shoot whether you're there or not."

I'd been standing in front of a person holding something that dangerous?

"Then could you take point? I'll follow behind you."

Kozakura shook her head vigorously.

"If we had an encounter of the first kind in the surface world, I could still bear it. But in the other world, I'm too scared to restrain myself. Even now, it's taking all I have not to start screaming."

Kozakura hesitated, then continued.

"There are times when I think phenomena in the other world are *deliberately trying to frighten humans.*"

I agreed with her there. This time was one example, but something had also felt off about the Kunekune and Hasshaku-sama. It was like they were trying to show people a form that would frighten them. When we were at Kisaragi Station, I had felt an even more clear intent to frighten humans and drive them into madness.

"...I understand. Let's find Toriko quick, and get back."

"I'd appreciate it if we could," Kozakura said with a serious look on her face.

Standing on a hill, I looked around the area. I still didn't really understand the geography of the other world. I had considered using the landmarks dotted around the vast plains to make a map, but hadn't gotten started on the idea yet. It was night, and we couldn't tell what was going on last time, and the time before that, we'd only covered a limited area.

"Can... Can you see... anything?" Behind me, a wheezing Kozakura caught up and asked.

"Erm... North is probably this way, so..."

With a wobbling compass in hand, I squinted, searching for familiar places. The grassy field at the bottom of the hill was sparkling; there was apparently something there that reflected light. When I looked past there, there was a gray, barrel-like structure.

"Found it!" I cried out despite myself. It was Toriko's usual point of entry, the skeletal building that connected to Jinbouchou. Things were looking good.

We were on the hill west of the building now. To reach it, we would have to cross the marsh. When I first met Toriko, I'd nearly died there. The sparkling at the foot of the hill was coming from the water pooled around the roots of the grass.

That meant the glitch-filled field where we'd met Abarato was to the right. As for the white, coral-like building where we had our encounter with Hasshaku-sama, it might have been hidden behind one

of the groves of trees that were scattered around, because I couldn't see it. The tracks which led to Kisaragi Station weren't around, either. I remembered having seen something like them from the rooftop of the skeletal building, though...

"Let's go."

When I turned back and urged her to follow me, Kozakura was squatting like some delinquent, hanging her head. She was breathing really fast. If she was winded climbing a little slope, she was as unhealthy as she looked.

"A-Are you all right?"

"Damn it, I'm in sandals here." With a groan, Kozakura used the shotgun as a crutch to help herself up.

I began descending the hill slowly, making sure not to open too much of a gap between us.

"Sorawo-chan, you're a surprisingly good walker."

"Huh? Am I?"

Compared to Kozakura, maybe everyone was.

"You're able to keep up with Toriko, so you have to be. She's a stamina monster, too, after all. Did you used to play sports?"

"Maybe it's because... back when I was a student preparing for entrance exams, I was always taking walks at night. Oh, and exploring ruins on my own was a hobby of mine, so I'm used to walking in places with bad footing."

"There's a rather dangerous hobby. Exploring ruins, alone, and as a woman? Crazy," Kozakura said, sounding surprised.

"Well, you're right. I certainly had my share of scares..."

Abandoned ruins were kind of dangerous. Delinquents would do bad things there, and weirdos sometimes made them into their hideaways... Besides, while I was making it sound cooler by calling it ruin exploration, I was just trespassing. I could have fallen through a rotten floor, or gotten tetanus off a nail that was sticking out. There were plenty of physical dangers. If I thought about it calmly, it was utter lunacy for a high school girl to be lurking around those places alone.

"...I was having a rough time back then, and may have fallen into a bit of desperation."

"Oh, why's that?"

"Something with my parents. Involving religion."

"Hmm."

"Oh, no. It was no big deal, really."

I was making excuses despite myself.

"My mother died young, and then my father and grandmother fell in with a cult, so things were a bit weird. They threw out our household Shinto shrine and Buddhist altar, and they went to this

place called Tashiro Pass in the Ouu Mountains a number of times... Our house became a place for believers to gather, and people spread rumors about it at school. They tried to make me join, and I really didn't want to, so I tried to stay away from the house as much as possible."

As we walked down the hill, I kept talking, as if trying to fill in the awkwardness between Kozakura and me.

"I nearly got kidnapped by another religious group on the way home from school, and someone torched the manga cafe where I was staying, so I was camping out in ruins for lack of any other option. Then, one night, in this run-down love hotel, I had this dream where I was hugged by this really soft, red person. I was like, *Ohh, is this my mom?* But, no, of course it wasn't. She was dead, after all. But that time, the person asked me, *Do you not need those people?* and I said I didn't. When I woke up, I was out of food and money. I went home, thinking about how much I didn't want to. I got some kerosene ready, and I waited."

"...Kerosene?"

"But I waited for days, and in the end no one came. Just when I was thinking 'good riddance,' uh, the police called, and they told me the bodies had been found. They told me that they got taken out by gas that had settled in a depression in the mountains. All of them. They wouldn't show me the bodies, though. Now I was alone. I managed to get into university somehow with a student loan, but those people, they were so passionate about charity they didn't leave me an inheritance. I mean, in the end, student loans are debt, right? I felt like I'd never repay it, and I had no idea what I was going to do, and then I met Toriko."

When I realized Kozakura wasn't saying anything, I stopped.

"I-I'm sorry, this can't be very interesting. I mean, it's no big deal, just ignore—"

"What do you mean, 'no big deal'?"

When I turned around, Kozakura was staring at me in blank amazement.

"Um, what?"

"Do you honestly believe that?"

"Huh... Is something strange? I think my story's a fairly common one."

"No, it's not."

As I stared blankly at her, Kozakura shook her head in exasperation.

"You've had a bad run of luck, too, huh."

"Sure..."

"Well, I can see why you're so unusually resilient now."

“Huh? I’ve never thought of myself that way, though.”

“You had me completely fooled. You don’t have the same strong sense of presence that Toriko does, after all.”

“Yeah, compared to Toriko, I’m nothing special... What made her personality like that anyway?”

“I don’t know about her personality, but she’s Canadian-born, and her parents were soldiers. They were in a special operations force called JTF2. Seems they taught her all sorts of things, from a young age. That shaped her character, I think.”

“Hmm. So that’s why she can use a gun.”

I nodded in satisfaction. It seemed they’d taught her well.

“Her parents are in Canada?”

“I hear they passed away.”

“Oh...”

For some reason, that wasn’t surprising to me. From the moment I met Toriko, I’d had that feeling. Toriko was in a hole like me, but despite that, she seemed to have something I lacked.

Well, then... from Toriko’s perspective, how had I looked?

6

The water in the grass was knee-high.

But that was my knees.

Kozakura was up to her thighs in water, and her face was pale.

“This is cold, okay?”

“Let’s get through quickly. From the way things looked up top, it’s not too far to dry land.”

It would have been a long way around if we wanted to avoid the marshland. There wasn’t much time until the sun set. I wanted to avoid encountering a hostile entity at night when I had Kozakura with me.

“The grass touching me underwater feels gross... Ah! Hold on, my sandal’s coming off.”

Kozakura seemed to be gradually losing her composure. Maybe to assuage her fear, she’d started getting more talkative. If she would just watch where she was pointing that gun, she was welcome to complain all she wanted. In fact, it was actually kind of cute how scared she was.

“Don’t rush. Just hold on to my clothes, and walk. If you see something in the water, could you tell me?”

“What do you mean, ‘something’?”

“Anything other than grass.”

What I was afraid of were glitches in the water. I had taken a quick look before we entered the marsh, and I hadn’t seen any of the

silver haze that indicated danger, but my eyes didn't reach underwater. We had to take each step cautiously.

"Ohhh, no, no, no, no, no..."

Ignoring Kozakura's chanting behind me, I pressed forward.

We'd walked for probably over ten minutes. Noticing something abnormal ahead, I raised my voice.

"Stop!"

"Ungh."

Kozakura plowed into my back and stopped.

"Wh-What?"

"It's a glitch."

That glitch, which we would have stepped right into if I wasn't looking out for it, was beautiful. There was a clearly defined cylinder in the water, and inside it was a vortex. I was able to see it because there were foreign objects inside the eddy. I had thought it was trash at first, but it was the twisted, torn-apart remains of a fire-extinguisher. Inside the cylinder, which was less than a meter across, there was a raging current, strong enough to tear apart hard metal.

What name would Abarato have given it? Something easy, like a "Washing Machine," maybe?

"We'll divert around to the left. Follow me slowly."

I couldn't be sure how far its area of effect was just by looking at it. If we were careless and got too close, it might pull us in all at once, so I led Kozakura away from it, keeping more than ten meters away. Once we'd cautiously made it through to the other side, I finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whew. That was dangerous, huh."

"What're they doing over there?"

"Huh?"

"I saw people I don't know."

I turned towards the lifeless voice, and Kozakura was looking off into the distance, up ahead of us on the right.

Her mouth hung open, drool dripping down to land in the water below.

As I followed her gaze, what jumped into my vision was four white scarecrows in the grass...

No, wrong.

Those were Kunekunes.

A harsh stench like that of raw fish struck my nose. I looked down before thinking, and I covered Kozakura's eyes.

"Don't look, Kozakura-san!"

When I shouted in her ear, Kozakura jumped a little.

"So-Sorawo-chan. Blech. Those things, they're crazy."

"Don't worry, we're fine. Those ones—I've beaten them before."

I talked fast, supporting the shotgun that Kozakura was holding.

"You can do this with your eyes closed. I'll look. When I say shoot, please shoot. Can you do that?"

"Just... Just do it, already..." Kozakura said, groaning in a way that wasn't cute at all.

She didn't have to tell me twice. I looked up, gazing directly at the Kunekunes.

When I perceived them, it caused an instant bout of nausea. The Kunekunes were trying to invade me through my sense of sight.

Still, four of you? You lost last time, so you're trying to win with numbers? Screw that power creep. You're not enemies in an RPG, okay? Unfortunately for you, though, I'm not the same person I was back then. I mean, I have the power to see you for what you really are now.

Huh? But wait, though. Didn't my right eye end up like this because I came in contact with a Kunekune?

By the time that thought occurred to me, my right eye had already recognized the Kunekunes.

In the next instant, I was cast into a strange world.

I was sliding over a watery surface that curved into a hemispherical shape. In the area around me, there were white spheres connected by thin string structures that were moving around. Everything was blue above the water. Beneath it was dark like a well. When I turned my consciousness in that direction, I was quickly pulled down into the very bottom of the well. In the darkness, I felt a prickling sensation. Overlapping of sensory patterns, forming some kind of meaning. White... scarecrows... rice paddies... snake scales... binoculars... As each concept rose to my mind, my mouth—my human mouth—moved, and I could feel it forming words.

Then, I understood.

The curved surface, it was my eye.

I was looking at myself from the Kunekune's perspective.

Half-crazed, I tore my mind away from it. My mouth formed words. The sound reached my ears.

"Shoot!"

The shotgun roared. The shot was spread horizontally by the GATOR, and it blew away two Kunekunes up ahead of us.

The tears flowed like I was a broken faucet. Catching the other two in my blurry vision, I yelled out.

"One more shot!"

The gun kicked, and on the other side of the grass the white shadows scattered.

The ejected shell fell into the water, then was instantly sucked into the Washing Machine. As the red plastic cylinder was torn to shreds, tears poured from my eyes.

The echo of the gunshot faded. I couldn't move. If I hadn't been leaning on Kozakura, I'd likely have slumped into the water.

"Urkh, get off... You're heavy..."

Kozakura's complaining finally pulled me back to reality.

When I got up, taking my hands off her, Kozakura squinted and looked around the area.

"Did we get them?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Sorawo-chan, you were babbling some weird stuff, you know?"

Kozakura looked up at me as if she was creeped out. I slowly nodded.

"It was like that when I encountered one of them with Toriko, too. Unconsciously spewing some bizarre language... So that was it. Those things, they were contacting the knowledge of the Kunekune inside me."

The bizarre language that came out of my mouth when I went Kunekune hunting with Toriko. It had seemed meaningless and random, but something about it bothered me. There were a number of words I recognized. When I looked it up later, I figured it out. It was fragments from the text of a net lore account of the Kunekune, patched together into something else.

"The creatures of this place use monsters as a template, but are still trying to access human knowledge of monsters...?" Kozakura frowned as she thought about it. "So, basically, they act in ways we expect monsters to act? Does that mean they're created inside the human brain?"

"But I've never heard anyone talk about the true identity of the Kunekune being a creature that moves around inside your eye. I'm having a hard time imagining the Walking Gallows we encountered at Kisaragi Station came out of any preexisting ghost story, either."

"In that case, there must be *something* in the other world, and it uses the horror stories inside people, and their concept of monsters..."

"Kozakura-san, you said it before, didn't you? That the phenomena of the Otherside looked like they were deliberately trying to scare humans. In order to cause fear, maybe they search the human brain, drawing from our database of horror stories, to create the forms they take?"

"Or, perhaps, it's the opposite. Their goal isn't to cause fear... It may be that contact with the other world inherently inspires fear in humans. The monster database in our brains simply happens to lie along the channel through which we make contact with the other world..."

Then, we heard a noise in the distance, and we both stopped. There was the same sound once more.

The bursting noise that rang out twice—it had to be a gunshot.
“...It’s Toriko.”
Without a shred of doubt, I knew.
Toriko was calling me.

7

Once we had shaken off the shock of the Kunekune encounter, we started walking once more.

As we progressed east, the water level gradually dropped. The sun started to set, and the wind picked up. When a moist wind blew across the water, it made it feel even chillier; Kozakura was shivering so bad I felt sorry for her.

“See? I told you Toriko was alive. You should’ve just left her alone instead of putting me through all this.” Trying to warm herself up with seething rage, Kozakura muttered a torrent of hateful invectives towards Toriko.

“I’ll turn that bird brain into fried chicken... Or chicken soup... If we had a saucepan, I’d add some fish and make hot pot...”

“It isn’t hot pot season.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m cold.”

The water receded from knee-level to calf-level, before we finally made it to dry land. Kozakura crouched down, totally spent.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course not. I was sliding my feet the whole time, trying to avoid losing a sandal. My thighs are killing me.”

“Okay. Let’s take just a three minute break.”

“What are you, some kind of ogre...?”

“Come on, Toriko’s calling!” I said with more passion than I’d intended to.

If she made the choice to shoot twice, that likely meant she was able to hear the two shots we’d fired against the Kunekunes from where she was, too.

“Toriko’s not far, so let’s keep doing our best until we get to her.”

Kozakura looked up to the heavens with an exhausted expression on her face.

“I thought you were a subculture maniac with no communication skills, but you were actually a psychopath with dependency issues? Give me a break.”

“Did you just say something really awful?”

“I wish you had some degree of self-awareness. Seriously.”

When I looked at Kozakura, clutching her shotgun and her knees, shivering, I started to feel a bit sorry for her. “Um, I don’t have any clothes to offer, but, uh... Would you like a hug?”

Judging by Kozakura's expression, that was not an appropriate offer.

"Erm, just in case you're misunderstanding, I, uh, don't have anything against you, Kozakura-san."

"Stop it, stop it! I still want to cling to the hope that I'm talking to a human being that understands words!"

"R-Right..."

"Before you go and say any more weird things, I'm going to start talking myself. MIT created an image generator called the Nightmare Machine. It's a program that uses deep learning to warp peoples' faces, or make scenery seem sinister, creating images that unnerve humans. If you just put things through a filter that follows certain fixed rules, it's simple to frighten humans."

"Oh, I can understand that. I think you could apply that sort of formula to true ghost stories and net lore, too," I said.

"The output of the Nightmare Machine is visual, but I'm sure it would be possible to create natural linguistic output in the same way. The point is, 'scary' is something you can make." Tapping a finger on her temple, Kozakura continued. "Let's call this filter for 'scary' a fear function. When the input of the sensory organs is passed through a fear function, anything we see or hear becomes scary. This is something that is known to happen in the case of things like alcohol dependence and depression, too. It's a malfunction of the nervous system, one that is completely inside the brain, but if the fear function existed externally, you would expect the same things to happen."

"Externally...?"

"In a place that warps the cognition just by being exposed to it. It could arise from societal causes, or physical causes such as air pressure or chemical substances, but the result would touch a weak point in the human brain... What we'd call 'haunted locations' may be an example of one such place."

"So, basically, you're saying that the Otherside causes anomalies in the human brain, and it acts as a massive fear function?"

"Yes. I do have one piece of evidence that this place exerts an effect of the brain." Kozakura pointed to the barrel of her shotgun. "Look at your own gun. You shouldn't be able to read the inscription or numbers on it."

I drew the Makarov from its leg holster and looked at it. Kozakura was right. The text carved into the metal had turned into some strange symbols, the meaning of which was completely indiscernible.

"Come to think of it... Whenever we came to this place using the elevator, the text on its panel got all weird, too."

"Somewhere in the transition from the surface world to this world, our linguistic abilities are being invaded. As proof that this is a

non-permanent change, the inscriptions on our guns will go back to normal when we take them home from the other world. It's not the text itself that changes, it's our ability to read. This phenomenon resembles sensory aphasia, one impairment of our higher brain functions. If there is damage to the Wernicke's area in the temporal lobe of the human brain, a person loses the ability to understand the meaning of words, and they might start speaking nonsense. However..."

Kozakura reached out, writing the kanji for "moon" on the ground. I could read it without issue.

"If something is written here, we have a mutual ability to understand it. However, what I've written here should have no meaning back in the surface world. Then what exactly is it that I've written? This may not only affect written text, either. Are we really managing to have a conversation?" Kozakura looked me in the eye then continued. "If what you just experienced through the Kunekune's perspective is true, the Kunekune are indeed having an effect on our linguistic capacity. The strange language is only a by-product of that. We didn't need to wait for an encounter with the Kunekune for that to happen, though. From the point we enter the other world, there's already something shoving its hands into our human brains. And so..."

"...as a part of that process, or as the result of it: fear is born."

We looked at one another, feeling a little chilled. Hesitantly, I opened my mouth again. "That's all very interesting, but your three minutes are up. Let's go."

Kozakura's eyes went wide. "Seriously? Give me another three minutes..."

"Umm. If you'd prefer, Kozakura-san, I can go on by myself."

"No! You ogre!"

8

Once we actually got walking, we reached the skeletal building in no time. I was prepared for a reunion with the dead body of that person who was killed by the Kunekune, but I didn't see it this time.

We reached the foot of the building where the bare concrete was exposed, and we had a look around the area. The ground floor was covered in soot, with a metal barrel left sitting there. No sign of Toriko.

"I'll go look up top, okay?"

Without responding to me, Kozakura tottered over to the barrel and looked inside.

"Sorawo-chan, got a light?"

"I do, but I don't think this is the time for a bonfire."

“I don’t care, give it here.”

I pulled out a box of waterproof matches, giving them to Kozakura, then I put a hand on the rusty ladder and started climbing.

...I didn’t recall that climbing ten floors worth of ladder was actually pretty hard until I had already gone up enough floors that it was too late to turn back. My arms got tired, and when I happened to look down, I was shocked to find I was higher up than I expected.

Huh? What is this? This is nuts...

Wasn’t it kind of insane, going up and down this ladder...?

I wasn’t counting, but I was probably four stories up. If a rung broke, or I lost the strength to hold on, wouldn’t that be the end for me?

The evening wind blew past, fanning my body. I panicked and clung tight to the ladder.

Kozakura seemed to have misunderstood me, but I wasn’t fearless. Just desperate. That was why, when I came back to my senses like this, I couldn’t take it anymore.

Calm down, I closed my eyes and told myself. You’ve used this ladder before. It was fine then, wasn’t it? You just have to take it one rung at a time, just like back then.

Like back then...

Oh, right. Toriko was there, though.

Just because I didn’t have her with me, it was this scary?

When I had Kozakura following me, I’d managed to keep tricking myself somehow, but the moment I was all alone, I turned into a mess. I had just finished making it through the Otherside, full of monsters and glitches, but now the mere height of a ladder was enough to immobilize me.

Had I always been this cowardly? That shouldn’t have been the case. If this were back during the time when my anger and irritation at everything drove me to go prowling through ruins at night, by the light of a single flashlight, this ladder wouldn’t have been a big deal.

I’ve gotten weaker.

It hadn’t been that long since I first met Toriko, but I was already useless without her.

That woman whose situation resembled mine just a little, but otherwise was nothing like me.

That woman who had all these things I didn’t, but seemed to be missing something even worse than I was.

That woman who was beautiful, good-natured, and strong, who was a completely different type than I was... and yet the two of us got along great.

That woman who said the most insensitive things with a straight face, and who didn’t understand me in the slightest.

That woman who had suddenly turned up in my life, turned it upside down, and then just up and disappeared.

The more I thought about her, the angrier I got.

I glared at my right hand, which was clenching the ladder and refusing to let go. *Move! Let go!* Not missing the moment my grip weakened, I moved my right hand up to the next rung. Next was the left. *Open! Move up!*

The engine of rage was revving up inside me. I was starting to get going. Right, left, hand, foot. My pace gradually accelerated. See? I really was better when I was angry.

“Even if you’re not here...” I started out loud. “Even if you’re not here, I can do this by myself.”

I beat the Kunekunes. I can climb this ladder, too.

“So... So...”

Narrowing my eyes at the roof that was drawing nearer, I grumbled.

“So... Hurry up... and come back, Toriko!”

Finally crawling onto the roof, ten floors up, I collapsed onto my back.

I looked up into the cloudy evening sky and let out a little laugh despite myself.

“Haha... What was that? I’m so weird.”

I’m fine by myself, so come back?

I was going to find her anyway, so what was I saying?

I stood up, drew the Makarov, and disengaged the safety. I pointed the gun skyward, plugged my ears, then pulled the trigger. Twice in a row.

There was the sound of gunfire echoing, and then the clear sound of the expelled casing bouncing off the concrete roof.

I waited for a time, but no shots rang out in response.

“...Come on, respond when I call you.”

I lowered my arm, Makarov still in hand, and began walking along the fence around the edge of the roof. I had a good view of the surrounding area from up here. Like I had remembered, far off in the east, I could see a set of tracks. Down that way was Kisaragi Station, where the U.S. Marines might still be struggling, unable to escape.

The south side was wide open, and when I looked towards the shadows, I was able to pick up the silver shimmer that indicated the presence of glitches. Looking at it again, I couldn’t believe we’d set foot in that place when we were so defenseless. The big white building where we’d met Hasshaku-sama was more full of holes than I remembered, making it look even more like dead coral. What happened to Abarato when he vanished beyond that blue light?

The west side was the marshland we’d just passed through. The

way the evening sun reflected off the water there was breathtakingly beautiful. Then, I caught sight of a thin, white shadow standing there. I braced myself, thinking it might be another Kunekune, but apparently not. It looked like a large bird... maybe a heron? As I was watching, it stuck its curved neck into the water, then returned to its prior upright standing position. If it was really a bird, that would make it the first animal I'd seen since coming to the other world, but I couldn't let my guard down. When I remembered something we'd seen last time, a massive bird that spread the smell of oil as it flew overhead, I looked away.

I continued following the fence around to the north side, where I stopped still in shock. On the north side of the building, there were scattered woods on land full of exposed rock. Beyond that, a city spread out.

Well, I called it a city, but that was just my first impression. It wasn't that large of an area. Maybe a village, at best. We hadn't headed north yet, but I had no recollection of having seen this place from the north side of the roof. The roofs had shingles that had fallen off here and there, and the walls had been made dirty by exposure to heavy rain, which made it hard to think it was constructed recently.

In between the houses, something moved.

Someone was there. Someone, or something.

Glowing crimson in the light of the evening sun, I saw the back of a head with long, bouncing locks of blonde hair.

"Toriko!" I shouted, leaning out over the fence. "Torikoooo!"

Instantly, I raised the Makarov above my head and fired.

Undeterred by the ringing in my ears, I unloaded the whole clip. The slide recoiled, and then there was quiet. I didn't know if she heard, but that crimson brilliance hid in the shadow of a building.

Then, down on the ground, there was movement. Kozakura was tottering through the woods towards the city.

"Kozakura-san!"

There was no response to my shout. For some reason, Kozakura disappeared into the woods without looking back.

There was something wrong with her. I pushed away from the railing, turning back and returning to the ladder with long strides. I put the Makarov away in its leg holster, and then, grabbing onto the ladder, my foot nearly slipping as I did, I descended as quickly as I could. With each rung, I grew more impatient. If this were a game, I could have just grabbed onto a support pillar with both hands, and then slid all the way down.

Once I was finally standing on the ground, I looked at the first floor. Kozakura was gone, and dried leaves I could only assume she had gathered from around here were crackling in the barrel. Next to

the fire was the box of waterproof matches I'd given her earlier, along with Kozakura's abandoned shotgun.

With how frightened she'd been before, there was no way Kozakura would have left without the gun. I picked up the matches and shotgun, then took off running.

9

I'm not catching up.

Her pace had seemed relaxed when I was looking from up top, but I'd run until I was winded, and I still didn't see Kozakura's back.

The sun was shining in from the west, and the trees of the forest cast long shadows as it finally began setting. When sunset passed, night would come; that was the time of monsters.

I'd fully discharged my Makarov on impulse, and now I regretted it. I still had bullets, but I hadn't thought to bring a spare magazine. If I got attacked, it was looking like I'd have to rely on the shotgun. The problem was: this was my first time touching this gun. Toriko might have been able to master any gun easily, but I was an amateur who just happened to have it fall into my hands. I didn't even know if this shotgun I was swinging around had the safety engaged or not.

How many times did Kozakura shoot again? I tried to remember as I ran. *Once at the entrance. Twice at the Kunekunes. Was that all? And how many shells did she load into this thing in the first place...?*

Before I had time to remember precisely, the forest came to an end. Suddenly, there was a paved road in front of me.

The asphalt in front of me was dried and cracked like in a desert area in Mexico, and weeds grew freely from between the cracks. An electrical line dangling from a tilted telephone pole swayed in the wind. The rows of houses on either side of the road were quiet, and there was no sign of life. The words "ghost town" seemed an apt way to describe this lonely scene.

Before approaching, I focused my consciousness into my right eye to look for glitches. The moment I did, I let out an involuntary cry of surprise.

That was because the whole of this town, which was dyed crimson by the setting sun, was wrapped in a silver halo.

"This is... all a glitch?"

I stared at the city in disbelief. Was it a trap? No, maybe not necessarily. Glitches were supernatural traps found dotted around the other world—that was what I believed, since that was what Abarato told us, but I had seen the train we used to escape Kisaragi Station, and Hasshaku-sama's other form wrapped in a silver haze, too. In contrast, when we came to the other world from Shinjuku, I had seen

the same sort of pale radiance, too. So, basically, it might have been the case that what my eye was detecting were spatial anomalies.

I picked up a pebble from the ground and threw it onto the asphalt. That was my substitute for the bolts Abarato had used. The pebble bounced with a hard sound, then came to a stop without incident. It didn't burst into flames, or explode, or anything like that.

I poked the road with the barrel of the shotgun, then quickly pulled it back. The metal part hadn't become abnormally hot, and it hadn't melted. When I brought the wooden stock close to the road, it was the same. There was no visible effect.

Normally, I would never move any closer, but I'd seen it from the top of the roof. The bouncing of Toriko's gorgeous, golden locks.

It seemed I was going to have to steel myself for this.

I raised up one of my feet, on which I was wearing hiking shoes, and carefully, cautiously, I stepped into the city.

"Hey."

"Gyah?!"

A sudden voice from behind me made me jump into the air. It was a throaty, deep male voice—I whipped around, and unconsciously pulled the trigger. Nothing came out. *The safety, huh?* I thought, and then went pale. *Did I almost shoot someone just now?!*

The muzzle was aimed towards a middle-aged guy in work clothes. His face... I don't know what his face was like. I could tell that he was middle-aged, and that he was male, but I couldn't make out his face. If I directed my attention towards individual parts, his eyebrows were bushy, there was stubble on his face... those details would enter my consciousness. But I couldn't assemble a full picture of his face inside my head.

"I told you you wouldn't be able to go back, didn't I?"

The faceless man said, clicking his tongue.

From the way he spoke and acted, and the way he was dressed, there was no mistaking him. It was the Time-space Man.

I searched above the trigger with my finger, and found a protrusion it felt like I could move. I clicked it in, and the trigger, which had been locked and immobile up until now, lightened as if it had been set free. It must have been the safety.

"Don't move. I'll shoot."

When I said that, the man looked dubiously at me, or so I thought.

In my conversation with Kozakura, I had posited that the Time-space Man might not be a living being, but in fact a bot. I think Kozakura was using the term "phenomenon" in the same way. He looked human, but was in fact just something like a piece of stage equipment that acted human.

If so, why should I care about shooting him? I thought, but at the

same time, I had serious reservations about pulling the trigger on anything that looked human. In an attempt to figure out what these guys really were, I focused my consciousness into my right eye.

For a moment, I didn't understand what I was seeing.

It wasn't a man. It wasn't even a bipedal creature.

It was a tall plant, growing out of the ground. Its green stalk rose straight up out of the asphalt, splitting in two in the middle, and then each end of the stalk bore five bunches of small red fruits that resembled salmon roe. There were arrowhead-shaped leaves growing from the whole of the stalk, and they blew in the wind.

Once I had recognized it as a plant, I couldn't see it as human anymore. I realized I was alone, on the street, staring vacantly up at a tall plant with my jaw hanging wide open, so I shut my mouth. I had no recollection of this thing growing here up until a moment ago.

"...What is this?"

I backed away in confusion. The plant was just growing there. It didn't move, and it didn't talk. It felt like it was watching me, and that was creepy. Even as I worried it might attack the moment I turned my back on it, I turned to look towards the city, and when I did, I screamed.

At some point, the whole area had filled with plants.

In the middle of the gateposts of the nearest house, there was something that looked like an elliptical sunflower framed with blue, white, and gold bumps. It had four large leaves, resembling the eight-fingered leaves of the fatsia plant, growing from close to the root of it.

Peeking out from behind a telephone pole, there was a pale plant with leaves that looked like the spread legs of a spider, and in the middle of its stalk there was a swell that looked like an insect gall. The ends spread out like the tip of a calligraphy brush, each carrying a green mass that looked like dandelion fluff blown up to a massive size.

Further along there was a plant with three fern-like leaves growing in a line in the center, and then two light pink buds growing off it. It was a little shorter than the rest, but still as large as a child in the upper years of elementary school. Its stalk bent under the weight of the buds, which made it look almost as if it were peering towards me.

The scene made it look like a great many people had frozen in the middle of whatever they were doing, and then been turned into plants like that. It felt like when you turned around playing Red Light, Green Light... I looked over my shoulder despite myself, and the first plant I'd encountered was still in the same spot. By this point, I could no longer be confident that my conversation with the man had even happened.

Unable to handle the tension, I started running.

I avoided the plants as I pushed towards the center of the city. Nothing interfered. I wasn't attacked. Not by anyone, or anything. The setting sun hung over a hollow city, full of nothing but human-sized plants.

"Toriko! Kozakura-san! Where are you?!"

There was no response. I went off the road, and even went into people's yards. I noticed the lingering remains of the former inhabitants' lives as I searched for Toriko and Kozakura. An open door, buried in the grass. A rusty abandoned tricycle. An old tire filled with water. The posters pasted on the concrete block walls had completely faded, and only the outlines of people on them were still vaguely there.

Walking around, I noticed one other thing that was abnormal. The city never ended. When I'd seen it from above, it hadn't looked this big, but no matter how far I went, I never reached the outside.

I cut across a parking lot with a broken chain-link fence and returned to the road. The sun hid behind the rows of buildings, while the silhouettes of plants were drawn in its lingering illumination. The image of many human beings looking towards me in the darkness popped into my head, and I shuddered.

What happened to the people who were once here? Those plants... Are they what's left of the residents? No, no, that can't be right. But...

Shaking my head to dispel my unpleasant imaginings, I had a sudden realization. Somehow, the plant next to me seemed familiar. It was short with pink buds. The human-sized plants I'd seen in this city all looked different, but this one stood out as unusual because it was child-sized, so it left an impression on me.

Child-sized...?

The moment I had a flash of inspiration, my ears were filled with the sound of shouting.

"...-chan! Sorawo-chan! I said I'm over here! Listen to me, stupid!"

"Ko-Kozakura?!"

Kozakura was right next to me, shouting. When I responded, Kozakura's eyes widened, and then she put her hands on her knees and hung her head.

"Whew, I finally got through," Kozakura said, her shoulders heaving with each breath. I don't know how long she was shouting, but her voice was hoarse.

"Wh-Where did you come from?"

"I've been here the whole time! You caught up with me, so I called out to you, but you wouldn't look at me, so I thought something must be wrong."

"Sorry. It seems I was looking at something else..."

As I spoke, I looked around the area. The plants other than

Kozakura had vanished, like it was all a dream.

“Why did you come here, Kozakura-san?”

“I, um... felt something calling out to me,” Kozakura said in a vague tone. “I was thinking I’d start a fire in that barrel. I gathered up all the dried leaves from nearby, and lit a match... Somehow, that managed to get the fire started, so I decided to go look for more kindling. Then, as I was walking around the building, all of a sudden, I heard Satsuki call my name.”

“Satsuki-san did?”

“I remember that it seemed natural to me that, ‘If she’s calling, I’ve got to go.’ The next thing I knew, I was in the middle of the city. For a moment, I thought I’d gotten out of this place... I realized I hadn’t pretty quick, though. I was alone, in a deserted residential area... and I’d lost my gun, too. I got scared. Just when I thought I was in trouble, you came. I was so relieved.”

Kozakura must have felt really lonely, because she kept talking. I cut her off before she could say more and asked, “You didn’t come across Toriko?”

“Huh? No, I haven’t seen her.”

“She should be nearby. Somewhere in this city.”

“Here? Seriously? I haven’t seen anyone but you and me.”

Kozakura seemed dubious, but I was confident. I had only seen it for an instant, but that blonde hair was definitely Toriko’s.

“I’m going to look a little more. Kozakura-san, you can go back without me.”

“Go back where?”

“If you go up on top of that building, there’s an elevator. You should be able to go back to the surface through there. I’ve used it before.”

“Don’t be stupid. You think I could go back on my own?”

“If you run, the building’s right there. I don’t have time for this, so please go home right now. I’ll give this back to you.”

I tried to turn over the shotgun, but Kozakura wouldn’t take it. I continued to talk, trying to persuade her. “Um, I understand that it’s scary to be alone, but things are about to get even more crazy here.”

“Why?”

“The sun’s setting.”

The city had sunk deep into twilight, and it was already getting hard to make out each other’s faces. The deep red light that remained just licked regretfully at the roofs of the houses. It wouldn’t be long before it, too, disappeared.

“If night comes, let me be honest—I’m not confident I can protect you. So...”

Kozakura let out an irritated sigh.

“You showed me that picture, and now you’re going to say that?”

“That picture...? You mean the ones of my doppelganger?”

“No. The one of Satsuki. Sorawo-chan, you really do have no interest in anyone but Toriko, don’t you?” Kozakura’s voice rose with exasperation. “I’ve always thought Satsuki died here. But... if she’s alive, I want to go see her. That’s why I can’t go back alone, Sorawo-chan.”

Just as Kozakura finished saying that, that last meager light of twilight finally vanished from the sky.

Night had come to the Otherside.

10

Night had just fallen, and the sky was still a deep blue, but the stars were already shining.

Did the night come this quickly without artificial light? The deep blue changed to dark black before my eyes. The number of stars, which were so dense they seemed to blot out the sky, overwhelmed me. Even back when I would look up to the night sky from the ruins near my home, there were never this many.

“I can’t make out any constellations. Have they changed from the surface world? Or has my pattern recognition been messed with...?”

As she stared up at the stars, Kozakura had at some point started holding onto the bottom of my shirt.

“Is this your first time in the Otherside at night, Kozakura-san?”

“Satsuki warned me well enough that I’ve never seen it before. Though, I had heard it was pretty. It really is,” Kozakura said, murmuring, “I wish I could have seen it with Satsuki.”

“Too bad you’re with me instead, huh.”

“Tell me about it.”

You’re not going to deny that?

“Well, please, take your time observing the stars, then. I’ll be going on ahead.”

“Listen, Sorawo-chan. You’ve got a real nasty personality, you know that?”

“But you said that I had a real nice personality before, didn’t you?”

“Sarcastically! Besides, where are you going? Even if you’re going to search, walking around at random is just dangerous.”

“I have one idea.”

It was an idea that occurred to me because of how Kozakura appeared as a plant before.

My right eye certainly seemed to be able to detect spatial anomalies. At the same time, it also seemed to be able to see through

to the true nature of things—like with Hasshaku-sama and the bull-headed monster that attacked Kisaragi Station. I didn't understand the logic behind it, but my eye had torn back the veil of illusion that the Otherside cast over human perception a number of times now.

I hadn't used this ability to see through a glitch before. And right now, I was inside a massive glitch. If this city wasn't a real city, in the same way that the man wasn't a man like he appeared to be, then by seeing through to the glitch's true nature, would I perhaps be able to see Toriko, who I know should be inside the city...?

Kozakura listened to me explain with trepidation.

"Now, assuming my guess is right, I should be able to leave you in a safe state, while I can go find Toriko."

"Huh? What? Hold on. In a safe state? What does that mean?"

"Um... Before this, you were a plant, so I was thinking I could have you become one again. Oh! It'll be fine, I'll make sure to turn you back."

"You make no sense. What do you mean, a plant?"

As Kozakura said that, sounding worried, we heard a howl from somewhere out in the night.

If I listened closely, somewhere in the darkness of the other world, I could sense something beginning to wake up. The air filled with the presence of living creatures. With a cry that sounded like a scream, something flew by high in the sky. The howls went back and forth, gradually increasing in number. They sounded dog-like, and yet also like a human imitating a dog. I was forced, like it or not, to recall the man-faced dogs that Toriko and I had encountered last time we were here.

Close by, in the abandoned houses to our left and right, there was secretive whispering. I couldn't tell what it was they were saying, only a certain gloominess came across in their conversation, but for some reason I couldn't help but think they were talking about us.

Kozakura huddled close to me.

"Hey... Those howls, they're getting closer, aren't they?" Kozakura asked.

"No doubt about it."

Even as I answered, I was fighting the impulse to run away screaming. They might not attack us directly, but the mere presence of something malicious watching us was terrifying enough on its own. Shaking her head in terror, Kozakura resignedly said, "It seems we don't have many options, do we?"

"We're good, then?"

"There's nothing 'good' about it. But I'll trust you, Sorawo-chan."

As she said that, Kozakura gripped the bottom of my shirt tighter. Was it a show of trust or a manifestation of unease? It didn't matter

one way or the other. What I was planning to do wouldn't change.

Ignoring the unsettling presences that were closing in, I focused my consciousness into my right eye. I made the entirety of the scene before me its target.

Suddenly, the area went quiet. When I looked down, noticing I felt lighter, Kozakura, who had been clinging to me, was now a plant once again. One of its leaves was touching me. Looking up, I gulped—I was completely surrounded by human-sized plants.

The clustered plants formed a circle, centered around me, many layers deep. It was like I'd wandered into a field of mutant sunflowers.

They just stood there, frozen like in the moments before the final stage of Red Light, Green Light, when the plants would touch Kozakura and me.

Did I just barely make it?

The thought occurred to me, and then a chill ran down my spine.

I couldn't say how exactly, but the situation may have been far more dangerous than I thought.

Come to think of it... Was this the true nature of this glitch? It wasn't the result I'd expected, and there was no sign of Toriko being around.

...Huh? Hold on.

When I first entered this city, I saw that man.

When I saw through the man's true nature, he was a plant.

After that, I saw through another plant's true nature, and it was Kozakura.

Then, when I tried to see through the true nature of the city, it turned into a world of plants again.

I've gone backwards, haven't I? I mean, just how many true natures are there here?

If I was seeing through things, that process should have only worked in one direction. But my perception had gone from one thing to another, then back again.

Which meant... This right eye of mine wasn't necessarily "seeing through" to the true nature of things? Well, what was I seeing then?

Mystified by this, I continued to look, and the plants surrounding me vanished. Only Kozakura, transformed into a flower, remained.

Across the street, a man wearing a suit turned and looked at me. He had a shocked look on his face, and wore a badge that looked like a windmill or a flower on his chest. Before the man could try to say anything, the scenery changed again, and I saw three middle-aged women standing in front of a nearby house. They persistently rung the house's bell, shouting something at those inside.

Suddenly, I felt eyes on me. Looking down, I saw myself looking up.

“Huh?!”

Crouching at Kozakura’s roots, I saw me.

That me persistently stared at the me who let out a cry of surprise, then stood up, walked over with a smirk—and vanished.

Okay... I was gradually figuring this out.

It wasn’t that my right eye “saw through” to the true nature of things... It was able to freely move between recognizing several aspects of a single phenomenon.

The Time-space Man who kept appearing, the three old women, the doppelganger, they were all fragments of this one “phenomenon.”

I had realized, much too late, that I recognized this deserted city. It had gone to ruin, so I never noticed before now, but I knew these streets. I had seen them just recently. This was near Toriko’s apartment, in the residential area in Nippori. The sky had brightened at some point. It looked like I’d returned to noon today, to the time when I went to visit Toriko.

When I looked up towards the roofs, I spotted Toriko’s apartment building. It was covered in ivy, the elevator had fallen apart, and the water tank on the roof had some unidentifiable black seaweed hanging down from it.

I could see me on the road up ahead, apparently heading to the apartment building. I started to walk, following me. When I focused on the doppelganger, I felt the city around us grow faint.

The veil over my perception was being stripped away, one layer at a time. The houses and roads suddenly flattened, folding up like paper, then vanishing outside my field of vision. In a world losing its form, the other me’s existence acted like the needle of a compass, pointing towards the way to go.

It might seem obvious that a being that looked the same as me would be creepy. But my face in that picture—the meanness and the lack of confidence, the unfounded arrogance, the selfish desire, it was all so very “me.”

That was why I could be certain of one thing about the me walking ahead of me. Even if she might betray me, she could never betray Toriko.

“I” would have to go search for Toriko. Beautiful, strong, earnest Toriko.

The other me stood up. In front of me, there was a single door. It was just a door—if there was anything else in the area, I could no longer identify it. It felt like there was some bizarre entity, beyond even the Kunekune, scratching away at the edges of my vision, but if I diverted my attention even a little, I felt like I’d lose sight of my destination, so I didn’t take my eyes off the me in front of me. However, with so many veils stripped back, I could sense that I’d

come to an incredibly deep place.

The doppelganger disappeared, as if being sucked into the surface of the door. It was a door I'd seen before... It was the one to Toriko's room, Room 404. I put my hand on the door handle, slowly pulling it open, then I stepped inside.

At the end of the entrance hall, I could see a room with wooden flooring. I walked right in without removing my shoes. There was no furniture inside. In that space, which was empty, as if she were preparing to move away, I found Toriko.

Toriko was sitting beside the glass door that led out onto the balcony, her back leaning against the wall. She was dressed in her expedition clothes, the same as I'd seen in the photos. Her AK lay haphazardly on the floor.

"Toriko!"

As I rushed over to her, Toriko waved a gloved hand and smiled softly at me.

"Sorawo. You came, huh?"

"Wh-What are you acting all relaxed for?" Setting aside my joy at our reunion, I jabbed at her despite myself. "Now, listen! I searched for you forever! No matter how much I called, you never heard, and when I fired the gun, you didn't respond!"

"Oh, so that was you. I thought it was the guys from Kisaragi Station."

"Why?! Of course it was me!"

"I didn't think you'd be coming here with me anymore."

There was something weird with her. She seemed oddly enervated.

"Hey, what's wrong? Are you hurt somewhere?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Well, okay then... Come on, let's go home?"

I pulled her arm, but Toriko made no attempt to stand.

"Sorry, Sorawo. I can't go home—I found Satsuki," Toriko said plainly.

"Where?" I asked, but Toriko just pointed out the window.

I felt a voiceless groan escape my throat. On the other side of the balcony, what I had thought was the sky, was that blue space. There was a woman in black floating there, looking down at us.

Her neatly cut black hair. Her pale skin and black-rimmed glasses. Her eyes, deep behind the lenses, which were incredibly blue. A far more terrifying shade of blue than my right eye.

Satsuki Uruma. Toriko's missing "friend."

I couldn't grasp the scale of it. She looked so close, yet so far. Being in her presence made my hair stand on end, but it wasn't just because I was intimidated by her.

She definitely looked just like the woman from the picture, but... she was different. This person was... not anything I could call human. I mean...

Ignoring me as I cowered, Toriko stood up, sliding open the glass door and stepping out onto the balcony.

“About Satsuki. She’s a special person to me.” Looking up at *that thing*, Toriko spoke. “I’m no good at making friends. It never worked out for me at Japanese schools, so I stayed cooped up at home. That’s when Satsuki appeared. First, as my tutor. Then, later, as my friend.”

Toriko kept talking in a dazed voice, like she was a young girl, dreaming—and I mean that in a bad way. Her eyes were unfocused, and it was clear her mind had taken off elsewhere.

“It was easy studying for school, so I didn’t think I needed a tutor. But Satsuki taught me all sorts of things. So many things I didn’t know.”

“Stop, Toriko.” I didn’t want to hear how close Toriko was with Satsuki-san before she and I met.

“She told me we were friends. And since we were friends, she taught me about the Otherside. She took me exploring, too. ‘I’m going to keep on teaching you all sorts of things,’ she said. And then... she disappeared. She changed my life so much... I could never go back to the way things were. And then—she suddenly vanished. Satsuki was all I had. So...”

“No.”

Chasing after Toriko, I stumbled out onto the balcony. Even getting a few steps closer to *that thing* floating in the blue space, I started dripping with cold sweat.

Toriko continued. “That’s why I came looking. Now, at last, I’ve found her. She really is alive. I have to go now... to be in the same place as Satsuki.”

When Toriko put her hand on the balcony railing, I grabbed her by the shoulder. “You can’t go, Toriko.”

“Why not?”

“Because—no, that’s not her...”

My right eye could see it. A different aspect of the entity that took the shape of Satsuki Uruma.

There was a massive windmill with hundreds of blades, or a great flower with an unbelievably complicated design, slowly spinning in the blue world. Every part of it ceaselessly recombined as it revolved, making it look like a kaleidoscope. That there was a woman’s face in the center of it seemed like a joke, but there was nothing to laugh at here. How incongruous it felt was just creepy and frightening.

“I have to go...”

I noticed something off about Toriko’s head as she mumbled that.

When I took another look with my right eye, I shuddered. Toriko's head was starting to unravel.

Her pretty face stayed the same, but her ears, her hair, and her neck rose up in thin, downy strands, and they formed a vortex. At the end of that eddy, they were sucked into the blue space, and disappeared.

"Listen, Sorawo. I feel like I'm starting to understand... Why it was Satsuki disappeared. Why I was called. What lies beyond there."

Even as she spoke, Toriko kept unraveling. She was falling apart.

"The truth is, we need to be scared. To be so ridiculously scared to the point we go completely insane. Every living creature experiences fear, but exploring that fear, getting to the bottom of it? Only humans can do that. Imagining fear and putting it to use is also uniquely human. That is why they use fear to access us. They are so utterly foreign, so completely beyond our comprehension, fear is the only channel on which they can interact with us. Fear is the means of contact, and also their goal. Sorawo, I figured it out..."

"Toriko, you can't understand that! There's no way!"

I clung to her in desperation. I held onto Toriko's head, trying to keep her from unraveling, but it wouldn't stop. Toriko kept going to pieces. Worse yet, my body started unraveling with hers. There was no pain, just a strange loneliness that spread through me.

"Sorawo...? What are you doing? I'm the only one who needs to go."

"Shut up! I'm not letting you go, okay?"

"Sorawo... This is none of your business."

"Huh?!" I raised my voice despite myself. "You're the worst, Toriko! What you just said is the absolute worst! You come in, you mess up my life, and now you have the gall to say that? That's not going to fly. Toriko, you sound like a child, so cut it out."

"What...? I don't get it," Toriko said in irritation.

"You don't?! You're so aggravating! Listen, if you don't want to get me caught in this, then turn back right now. That's not Satsuki you're seeing. It's a monster wearing the guise of someone precious to you!"

I remembered our encounter with Hasshaku-sama. That time, I was the one who was tricked, and Toriko just barely held me back. This time, it was my turn. I wasn't letting them take Toriko anywhere. No matter who or what they were—I didn't care.

I put my left arm around Toriko's head, raised the shotgun with my right, and rested the barrel on the balcony railing. I glared at the revolving aberration that filled most of my vision.

So, big-ass windmill woman, what do you think is the biggest lesson I've learned in all of my experiences so far? It's this: if I look through my

right eye when I shoot, no matter how far beyond my ability to understand some entity is, the bullets will do their job.

“...You’re so dead.”

I disengaged the safety and pulled the trigger. The 12 gauge shot expelled through the GATOR spreader punched a straight line of holes in the giant revolving flower.

“Huh... What? Satsuki’s face...” Toriko said in a dazed tone.

Ignoring her, I hooked the slide on the railing and ejected the cartridge. I fired a second shot. The whirling kaleidoscope spasmed, and it started to distort. I kept firing. A third shot, then a fourth shot. Finally, with the fifth shot, I ran out of ammo.

The massive flower that had been all torn up by my shots was still spinning, but it suddenly seemed to reach its limit, and every part of the thing began breaking down at the same time. With parts of her scattering in all directions, the windmill woman broke down. That face stared right at me. Neither blaming me, nor smiling.

As if she’d just woken from a dream, Toriko started shouting.
“...Huh?! No! This isn’t Satsuki!”

You... Oh, you...

“I told you so, didn’t I...? Don’t be so easy to manipulate. Yeesh.”

“Huh? What? What do you...? Hold on, Sorawo, my head, is something kind of weird happening to it right now?”

“Just stay put a moment, okay? It’ll settle down soon, probably.”

Toriko’s unraveling body gradually returned to normal. There was no time to breathe, though, as the balcony disappeared out from under our feet. The apartment building itself went away, leaving Toriko and me in a world of endless blue.

We didn’t fall, but it was hard to tell if we were actually standing up, either. It felt like we were going to trip and fall over, so, simultaneously, we both leaned on one another for support. I felt a clenching feeling in my stomach that told me if we fell over, we might keep falling forever.

Perhaps having calmed down a little, Toriko hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Um, er, Sorawo-san.”

“Yes? What is it, Toriko-san?”

“...What was I trying to do?”

“Why, I do believe you got hooked by a monster and were trying to go off somewhere without me.”

Toriko fell silent for a while.

“...I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll never forgive you, but it’s fine. I’ll never forgive you, though,” I said.

“Which is it...?”

Having decided I wasn't going to give the uncharacteristically worried Toriko's question an answer, I opted to change the topic. "It was probably a trap. All of it. The city, and the man."

"What do you mean, the man?"

I couldn't help but feel like we'd been lured in by someone. Satsuki was bait for Toriko and Kozakura, and Toriko was bait for me.

I was sure the Time-space Man and the other phenomena were all just parts of that trap.

I could only speculate as to what their goals were, but that thing about contact that Toriko said while ranting stuck with me. There was something beyond the blue light, and it had set a trap because it took an interest in us? Had we managed to escape it...?

I thought about it, but couldn't find an answer. Eventually, the construct with a woman's face on it finished breaking down completely, and it vanished into the blue.

Toriko watched with lingering traces of loneliness in her expression. Or so I thought, but then she opened her mouth.

"Let me just say that this is partially your fault, too, Sorawo."

"Huh?"

"Because you were saying things like, 'I'm not going to go there with you anymore,' and, 'You're not my friend.' I was so shocked, I—"

"Whoa, hold up. That's not what I said."

"Well, it's what I heard! If you feel bad about it, then think about how we're getting back home from here."

Toriko pouted. She retrieved the AK, which was floating nearby, by pulling on its strap.

"Ugh... You're so high maintenance!" I said, accidentally letting my blunt opinion slip out. I thought she'd get mad, but Toriko seemed to be happy about it, somehow.

I thought for a little while. "Fine, but before we head back, we're making a side trip. We have to pick up Kozakura-san."

"Huh? Kozakura came, too?"

"Yep. When she sees your face, you're gonna get murdered, Toriko, so be ready for that."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see soon enough."

I extended a hand to her, and Toriko took it.

The moment our eyes met, Toriko suddenly started chuckling.

"What? Laughing when you see someone's face is a little rude, you know?"

"No, that's not it, sorry. The thing is, I'm actually really shy, but for some reason, I've been fine with you since the first time we met. I was just wondering why. Then I remembered the first thing that helped break the ice."

Who're you calling shy?

I wanted to take a jab at that, but fair enough, I did feel like she'd been pretty brusque in her interactions with Abarato and the Marines.

"What was that?"

"I called you Ophelia, remember?"

"Ohh, yeah." She was talking about the time I got taken down by the Kunekune, and was enjoying the lie-down bath of death.

"When I did, your expression was so totally, 'What is she even talking about?' It made me think, 'Oh, now here's a girl I can get along with.' I figured you had no intent of hiding who you were."

"The thing about that..." I began, but then swallowed the words I was about to say.

The thing about that, Toriko, is... I was just staring at you in fascination.

"Yeah, yeah, that's the look. That's why I like you, Sorawo."

"...Is that a fact?"

"Don't get mad. I'm complimenting you." Toriko gave me a flawless smile.

"All right, let's go home. What do I do?"

"Okay. Well, could you just grab something at random then?"

"Okay."

I looked at the space around us with my right eye, and Toriko grabbed it with her left hand. Her translucent fingers tore through the blue light like it was paper. On the other side, I could see another light. It was the nighttime ghost town I was in until just a little while ago.

The two of us spilled out through the rift, and came out just outside the apartment building.

"Whoa, it's dark. It's night, isn't it?"

"That's right. Be ready to use your gun."

Holding Toriko's hand tight, I focused my consciousness into my right eye, and we walked backwards down the path I'd come.

We couldn't let our guard down yet. We still had to go back to where Kozakura was, return her to human form, make it through the monster-infested forest, then climb up the skeletal building.

Kozakura was going to be pissed. She had stayed behind hoping she'd be able to see Satsuki-san, but it ended up being a waste of her time. I wracked my brain, thinking how best to explain it to her.

I think what we met was a fake Satsuki, but Kozakura seems as hung up on Satsuki as Toriko is... If I tell her I shot it without checking first, I'm sure she'll go ballistic.

Maybe I'll tell her while she's still terrified by the Otherside, and then take off before she gets her bearings again once we've returned to the surface world.

Or maybe I ought to just pull her up by the roots, and bring her back in plant form. I kind of want to see how those pink buds would look when they blossom.

...No, no, I couldn't do that.

As my thoughts started drifting in a more unsavory direction, Toriko brought her face close to mine.

“Hey, Sorawo. I forgot to say this, but... Thanks for coming after me.”

Then, with a slight smile, she brought her lips close to my ear and continued.

“So... When should we come next?”

I looked back at Toriko, slowly blinking.

Feeling driven by an impulse to find out, if I could shift the aspects of the world right now and turn Toriko into a plant, I wondered what kind of flowers might bloom from her.

Works Referenced

For the scientific explanation of fear, I referenced the following two volumes. However, any errors included in this book are solely my own responsibility.

Nobuyuki Kawai/Naoyuki Uchimura, *Kowai no Ninchi Kagaku* [The Cognitive Science of Scary], Shin-yo-sha Publishing, 2016 - Kazuhisa Todayama

Kyoufu no Tetsugaku Horaa de Ningen wo Yomu [The Philosophy of Fear: Reading Humans Through Horror], NHK Publishing, 2016

In addition, this work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore. Of those, I would like to write about a few that most influenced the story. This touches on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please be careful.

■File 1: Kunekune Hunting

The nonsense Sorawo babbles uses pieces of net lore about the Kunekune mixed together. (Kozakura's nonsense in File 4 is the same) The text quoted came from the 2channel message board's Occult/ Paranormal Phenomena Board in "Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?" [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 6, post 212, "Wakaranai Hou ga Ii" [It's Better to Not Understand] (7/7/2001), thread 31 of the same, posts 756, 759, 761, 762, 763, and 764, "Kunekune" (3/29/2003), and thread 44 of the same, posts 122, 123, 124, 126, and 127, "Shiroi Kunekune" [White Kunekune] (7/9/2003).

The method of using an elevator to go to the other world is based on net lore, but the method appearing in this work differs from the original. This is famous as a 2channel cypypasta, but the source is likely not 2channel. (*1) The oldest record of someone having arrived there comes from the Moebius Link message board's ETC category, the Horror message board, "Nazo no Ooi Kiken na Asobi Kenkyuu linkai" [The Committee for Studying Highly Mysterious and Dangerous Ways of Playing Around] number 1316, (2/12/2008). "It's the most dangerous method, and a very dangerous way to play around." "If you go, I hear there's no way back..." It was written like it was second hand information, but I was unable to find any older records on the internet. If it was not an original creation of the poster, there may be an older source in a book or something.

One ghost story that may have had an influence here is “Ikai he no Tobira” (The Door to Another World). This story, which was told in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 87, posts 565, 566, 567, 568, and 569 (6/11/2004), featured an account of going to another world through an apartment building’s elevator, and it occasionally comes up in discussions together with, “Isekai ni Iku Houhou” [Ways to go to Another World].

*1: On some summary pages for “The Time-space Man,” the 2channel message board Occult/Paranormal Phenomena board’s “Jikuu no Ossan” [The Time-space Man] thread, post 43 (3/12/2006) is given as the source, but this is a mistake, and the content of it is completely different.

*2: The other ghost stories mentioned here are from reports of people’s experiences written as “true ghost stories,” but “Isekai ni Iku Houhou” is told of in rumors while being of unclear origin, it is an “urban legend.”

■File 2: Hasshaku-sama Survival

There is no direct quotations used, but “Hasshaku-sama” originated in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 196, posts 908, 909, 910, 911, 913, 914, 915, and 916 (8/26/2008). There are two threads of the same name, so be aware of this if you go looking for the original.

The Compass Men that Sorawo is reminded of when seeing Hasshaku-sama’s other form are based on a story included in *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Dainiya* [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The Second Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Media Factory, 1998), Story 78, “Ame no Naka ni Hikaru Mono” [The Thing that Shone in the Rain]. The source for “upside down torii gates that travel the mountain late at night” was from *FKB Kaidan Goshoku* [FKB Five Colors of Ghost Story] (Shirou Kuro/Izuku Suzakumon/Tasuku Ikei/Kuroki Aruji/Ranzo Tsukune, Takeshobo Bunko, 2013) in the story “Kobuzuka” by Izuku Suzakumon.

When this story first appeared in SF Magajin, I was unable to remember the later source, and wrote “flying torii gates that were seen by several witnesses in the mountains of Kyoto.” After publication I found this source, and was surprised that it resembled elements of “Ame no Naka ni Hikaru Mono” [The Thing that Shone in the Rain] more than I thought. Seeing the strange similarities in different storytellers’ accounts of their experiences is one of the joys of digging through true ghost stories, but I don’t know why I didn’t realize it when I first read “Kobuzuka,” and am confused as to why I

remembered them as flying. Incidentally, there are separate sightings of “flying torii,” and if you search online you will find photographs, but I was not actually aware of this at the time File 2 was written. Furthermore, the true identity of this flying torii has been identified as a hanging sound sculpture along the Kumano Kodou pilgrimage route. (In other words, it actually exists.)

■File 3: Station February

The first appearance of Kisaragi Station was on the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in “Mi no Mawari de Hen na Koto ga Okottara Jikkyou Suru Sure” [The If Something Weird Happens Around You, Report it Live Here Thread] thread 26, posts 98 through 635 (1/8/2004 and 1/9/2004).

Also, the scene inside the train at the end is based on “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] posts 9, 12, and 13, “Enmu” [Monkey Dream] (8/2/2000). The bizarre words in this work also use partial quotations from these two stories, including comments made by other posters in the thread as the storyteller was posting.

■File 4: Time, Space, and a Middle-aged Man

The collection of net lore which would come to be referred to as “Jikuu no Ossan” [The Time-space Man] first appeared in “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 104, posts 280, 281, 282, 283, 284, and 288, “Jikuu no Bannin” [The Watcher of Time-space] When this story was written, commenters in the thread said, “I’ve seen a story like this somewhere before.” That was “Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?” [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 92, posts 65 and 66, “Jikuu no Zure?” [A Time-space Dislocation?] (2/6/2005). It was after this that the number of narrators saying, “I had a similar experience,” increased. Information on the Time-space Man is collected on summary sites, but the majority of these take copypastas as their authority. These two are the original source.

The scene where multiple suspicious middle-aged women visit the home takes its image from Miyoko Kudou’s *Nichinichi Kore Kaidan* [Every Day is a Ghost Story] (Chuou Kouronsha, 1997), “Chaimu ga Natta” [The Bell Rang] and other similar stories I saw online.

There are other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken indirect influence. Because I do not wish to spoil the reader’s interest by dissecting the author, and, more importantly, because even I do not know all of my influences, I will refrain from listing more, but let me say my thanks to all of their creators. Thank you very much.

This book is my small way of returning the favor for the fear you have always inspired in me.





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Otherside Picnic: Volume 1
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First published in Japan in 2017 by Hayakawa Publishing Corporation

The book is published by arrangement with Hayakawa Publishing Corporation

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2019